UNMUTING THE VOICES OF THE OPPRESSED:

CREATING EFFECTIVE AVENUES OF INCLUSION FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITHIN THE AME CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

UNMUTING THE VOICES OF THE OPPRESSED: CREATING EFFECTIVE AVENUES OF INCLUSION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

This project examines the nature of the marginalization of young adults between the ages of 21-39 within the AME Church. Specifically, how can platforms of inclusion be created, allowing for equal representation of the voices of young adults in critical decisions regarding the future of the denomination? The analysis of the number of young adult delegates to the preceding General Conference of the AME Church in 2021 was used to highlight the issue of exclusion as it relates to this age group being given less than 6% representation in the overall voting delegation. This delegation can pass laws, elect officers, and assign task forces to examine concerns that may prove detrimental to the denominational future and current operational effectiveness.

A focus group of twelve people belonging to the Richard Allen Young Adult Council (RAYAC) was conducted in New Orleans, Louisiana, in June of 2023. During this session, a 20-question survey was given to the attendees to determine their perspectives on inclusion or exclusion concerning key leadership positions and decision-making power within the AME Church among their age group. Additionally, five key persons within RAYAC leadership were interviewed individually via Zoom to garner their respective perspectives on the statistical data regarding the representation of young adult delegates at the preceding General Conference and their views on the climate for attracting and maintaining young adults within the AME Church.

Findings indicate a strong perception of marginalization from the denominational hierarchy, which streams down the various levels of the organizational structure. However, with appropriate legislative action, a new paradigm of inclusion can not only be actualized, but it is also detrimental that the materialization of culture and structure-shifting laws and regulations be implemented. Some questions had varying results regarding the degree of marginalization of young adults, as some experiences in the denomination were contrasting with others. The final chapter poses recommendations for tools at the various levels of the denomination to address this concern and provide a pathway for moving forward with greater levels of inclusion for all ages within the denomination.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the three sets of parents I have been blessed to have. First, my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Arlue, and Florence Moore. Although they are no longer with me, I pray that I have done something to make you proud. Your love, support, and guidance have meant more to me than anyone could ever know. Mom, thank you for loving me unconditionally and for guiding me spiritually. Dad, thank you for supporting me and always being there for me. I miss the both of you more than words could express, but I am most blessed to have had you as a mother and father.

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tremendous sacrifices to support their parents but provide the most incredible joy this world can give. I love you wholeheartedly, and thank you for being who you are. Thank you all!

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Table Of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background....1
Introduction....1
Background....2
Historical Reflection....4
Ministry Reflection....5
Mission Reflection....6
Reflection on Spirituality....12
Reflection on Congregational Identity....15
Reflection on Programs....16
Reflection on Capacities and Resources....18
Reflection on the Theological Paradigm....21
Dissertation Structure....24

Chapter 2: Background and Context....25
Statement of the Problem....25
Delegation Statistics for the 2021 AME Church General Conference....33
Biblical Justification....35
Required Changes....37
Expected Outcomes of Change....42
Ministerial Competencies....44

Chapter 3: The Activist....49
Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram (Retired)....49
Personal History of The Activist....51
His Church....53
The Interview....56

Chapter 4: Methods....82
AME's Previous Efforts....82
The Current Study's Interview Questions....85
Description of Interview Subjects....88

Chapter 5: Findings....95
What the Respondents Said and Meta-Analysis....95
Prescription Documents....112
2024 General Conference Proposed Legislation Form....112
Concrete Action Plan....115

Chapter 6: Discussions and Conclusions....123
Limitations....123
Implications and Recommendations....134
Cautionary Tale....142

Appendices
Appendix A: Definition of Terms....148
Appendix B: Geographical Scope of the AME Church....150
Appendix C: Strategic Plan Executive Summary....153
Appendix D: IRB Research Protocol....157
Appendix E: IRB Interview Protocol....161
Appendix F: Interview Protocol....165

Bibliography....167

Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

The decline of church attendance in America is well documented and continues to be studied regarding its impact on American life. As report after report continues to be compiled regarding the exodus of American Christians from church affiliation, all protestant denominations are impacted to varying degrees, some more adversely than others. The AME church is undoubtedly one of those denominations that has been and continues to be plagued by declining membership. This absence of attendees is particularly noticeable amongst young adults between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. The decline in young adult membership was evident before the turn of the twenty-first century. To this end, a part of the strategic plan for the sustainability of the denomination was proposed, which included a SWOT analysis on the denomination. One of the elements listed as a weakness was the inclusion and involvement of young adults. From 2002, when the strategic plan was composed, to this very hour, little to nothing has been done to include young adults in key decision-making roles and higher levels of leadership or provide equity in shaping the direction of our future as a denomination.

This concern must be addressed to secure not only the future of the church, but also to produce a vibrant contemporary institution that is poised to meet the spiritual, moral, and physical challenges of our society. A failure to address this glaring need will ultimately result in the slow death of the AME Church. The danger of slow death is that it often goes unnoticed and undetected until it is too late to reverse fortune.

As a pastor and member of the AME Church, who started his ministerial journey as a member of the millennial generation, I can relate to the frustrations of being rejected and excluded from certain positions and serving on key committees simply because of my age. Thus I have an empathetic perspective on this issue. Also, I am sympathetic to this issue because of the numerous millennials who have expressed their frustrations with limited roles, lack of inclusion, and suppression of their gifts, ideas, talents, and perspectives on pertinent issues. Possessing a deep devotion for the church's future, drives me to a passionate pursuit for a resolution that will promote inclusivity for all generations.

Background

I officially began my ministerial journey in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church on March 4, 1998. That day, I preached my initial sermon, also known as the trial sermon, at the Oak and officially began my ministerial journey in the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) Grove AME Church in Detroit, Michigan. Until becoming a member of the Oak Grove AME Church congregation, I did not know much about the AME Church. However, after spending time with key lay leaders of this blossoming congregation, I became an ardent advocate of the mission, ministry, and spirituality of the AME Church. I discovered that the AME Church had an identity of liberation and equality, which were the guiding posts behind its founding and establishment. After further study, I learned that the AME Church had a history of program development to meet the needs of congregants and community members alike. It was this simultaneous approach to service that made this international institution appealing to me, and thereby, I found a faith institution with a history of exhibiting my values and perspectives on what a church should be and what a church should be doing. I saw the church's resources being

used to provide communal uplift and not just institutional enhancement. I witnessed the power of collaboration with sacred and secular partners to achieve like-minded goals for people with whom we had intimate and distant contact. In essence, I witnessed a lived-out theology of what I believed to be the character of Christ demonstrated in real-time.

However, as all institutions are composed of individuals, and individuals are instruments of imperfection, the AME Church also has its shortcomings. Some of these imperfections are rooted in theological questionability, while others are rooted in the application of its polity and governance. Given the nature of the AME Church being a faith-based institution, these flaws are naturally assumed to exist. It is not unusual to debate theological issues or for a hierarchical system to contain some leaders who will inevitably abuse their power for personal gain. However, I would argue that its most serious flaw is antithetical to its founding and mission: the presence and perpetuation of internal injustice. From the weaponization of structural authority to the isolation of specific segments of its population from resources and opportunities, the AME Church certainly is not a flawless representation of Jesus Christ. However, its most blatant hypocrisy revolves around its political postures in the secular world versus its voter suppression and generational supremacy within its confines. The most egregious trespass against an ethical standard, in my opinion, is the AME Churches' constraining and suppression of its young adults, specifically those in the age range of 21-39.

I began my ministry journey at thirty, which would have made me a millennial according to today's generation categorization. Over the past 25 years, I have served five congregations across three states, two in the Midwest portion of the country and one in the Southern region. While a different geographical culture exists in our nation's various regions, I have found some things to be synonymously present across these geographies. The one that stands above all others

for me is the departure of young adults and the exclusion of those who remain. I pray that this project will highlight this issue from a historical, contextual, and theological perspective while offering hopeful solutions to end the marginalization of this critical age group within the confines of the AME Church. It is my deep concern and greatest fear that a failure to secure just outcomes for this specific demographic will cause a continuation in the current decline of church membership of young adults within the denomination but will also endanger its future existence.

Historical Reflection

The foundation of the AME Church can be best summed up in its historical preamble, which reads:

> *The African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose founders affirmed their humanity in the face of slavery and racism, stands in defense of disadvantaged and oppressed peoples in the 21st century. From the origins in the Free African Society through the involvement of the AME Clergy and lay in the Civil War of the 1860s and Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the AMEC has preached salvation from sin and deliverance from bondage. The Americas, Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe. Whether in schools, seminaries, hospitals, or social-serve centers, the AME Church has lived the gospel outside its sanctuaries. This mandate still informs its ministry, vision, and mission in the Church's third century of existence.*[1]

This historical preamble is a descriptive statement that encapsulates the mission, vision, purpose, and objectives of the AME Church, which shall be addressed within this document.

[1] African Methodist Episcopal Church. *The Doctrine and Discipline African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Roderick Belin, 2022): 21.

Ministry Reflection

While there are various references made to the term "ministerial" in a plethora of listings in the Book of Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church, there is no defined meaning for what ministry is, how it is done, or what it looks like in the framework of the church. The expectation of members' care, support, witness, or service provision to one another is left to an unspoken expectation of Christian character that we would like to think exists in the faith we claim to share. While there are rules governing behavior concerning orderly conduct, there is no distinct definition of ministry to enlighten members of the expectations they should have of each other. The terminology full, good, and regular standing, as well as full communion, are used specifically and generally as a qualification for eligibility to hold any office or membership in the AME Church.[2]

Every quarter of the annual calendar, a meeting is held at every local church with the presiding elder, who serves as an intermediary management personnel, to discuss the ministerial stewardship of the local congregation. Involved in this process is a listing of thirty-four questions to be answered, known as the Disciplinary Questions. Question number twelve asks, "How many members have been expelled? What are their names? Why?[3] While, again, there is no defined expectation of how members are to minister to one another, there is an expectation that a particular character be exhibited within the body of the local church, and a failure to live up to that standard can ultimately lead to the member being expelled. While many steps must take place before such an action is to be executed, the dissemination of the expectations of membership fellowship appears to be a chief responsibility of the local pastor and the lay leaders

[2] African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Doctrine and Discipline, 891.
[3] Ibib., 307

to cultivate an environment of love that demonstrates care, support, and service to the needs of the membership. As I have witnessed the culture of the local church, from both in front of the pulpit and behind it, I have seen examples of exemplary service to members in the form of financial support, the sharing of references and resources, as well as intentional fellowship designed to bring about a more cohesive and cooperative environment. However, while many members of the senior population often find community within the local church context, too often, that same sense of fellowship is not easily found among young adults. As a pastor, I understand that the spiritual and natural needs of different age groups will differ. In my experience, the church has not always been intentional enough in meeting the needs of its young adult population. This is not to say that the church does not care about its ministry to young adults, but often, our congregants are ill-equipped to address expressed needs. I hope this project will help provide a revelation to those who may not be aware of this issue and provide tools for managing the same.

Mission Reflection

The mission statement of the AME Church is as follows:

The Mission of the AME Church is to minister to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people.

The vision of the AME Church is as follows:

> *At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the AME Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost and to serve the needy. The Church also must continue to encourage all members to become involved in all aspects of church training.*

Historically speaking, the AME Church has a demonstrated record of accomplishment in living out the institution's mission and vision. From caring for those who have been sick in both the congregation and community alike to advocating for equal rights for all people globally and standing as a faith institution that focuses on the simultaneous accomplishments of academic and theological excellence, the AME Church has been a vital instrument for Black people in America. It was in 1903 when W.E.B. Du Bois described what he called "the great African Methodist Episcopal Church" as "the greatest Negro organization in the world."[4] Religious intellectual and devout Presbyterian Gayraud S. Wilmore stated that the AME Church was America's "premier predominantly black denomination."[5] Undoubtedly, there has been much advancement in the advocacy for the causes of Black people by the AME Church. However, like all institutions, the oppressive residue of American culture must always be contented with as a significant threat to the continuance of the mission of African Methodism being carried out. While the mission of the AME Church aims to focus on the service it renders, both inside and outside of the walls of the local church, the internal focus has often centered upon fellowship and various styles of worship. While fellowship and worship are critical functions of any religious institution, a fellowship focus can very easily, and in many cases, has led to a sense of tribalism that excludes certain groups within the community of believers and a misguided and misappropriated emphasis on worship critique can lead a people away from who should be the object of their worship, which is God, to the worship experience itself becoming the critical object of priority.

[4] Dennis Dickerson. *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History (Cambridge:* Cambridge University Press 2020), 1.
[5] W.E.B. Du Bois., *The Souls of Black Folk (*New York, New York, New American Library, 1903, 1969): 85, 215, 217..

To put it another way, the mission of the AME Church, in many ways, like any mechanism, requires occasional maintenance to ensure that it operates at its maximum capacity and fulfills the totality of its purpose. While shifting elements in domestic and global culture have called for adjustments in how the mission and vision of the church manifest at both the local and connectional levels, individual congregations have demonstrated practical creativity in the continuance of the cause of African Methodism. While the generational shifts and transitions have not been efficiently executed, the church founded by Richard Allen and a group of newly freed slaves continues to march forward. From the early days of agrarian culture to the industrial revolution and on to the contemporary technological age in which we live, the AME Church continues to strive with great zeal and determination to live up to its foundation. Voter registration drives, protests against injustices inflicted upon marginalized communities, tutorial programs for youth, financial literacy engagements, and feeding and clothing for the less fortunate continue to be staples in many AME congregations today.

Social justice issues remain at the heart of the AME Church today. While in the tradition of the Black Church, the art of preaching is still very important to the furtherance of the institution and the spreading of the gospel message of salvation, other concerns are equally pertinent. The critical issues of racism, sexism, ageism, voter suppression, gentrification, food deserts, digital divides, gun violence, police brutality, mass incarceration, and other oppressive systems that yet permeate our society lie at the forefront of the continued mission of the AME Church. These issues are not only of great external concern but also manifest and must be addressed internally. I argue that injustice internally is even more dangerous than external injustices. To minister to the social development of all people, we must be careful to remember the wisdom of our elders to teach us that charity begins at home. Not only did the elders remind

us of this invaluable lesson, but scripture also points to the notion of starting domestically before you move globally. In the Book of Acts, chapter one, verse eight, Jesus informs his disciples of not only incoming power and its purpose but also where it is first manifested in Jerusalem. The mission of the AME Church, now more than ever, must concern itself with our Jerusalem before we can move to our Judea, Samaria, and uttermost parts of the world. I am confident that we shall continue to take up this endeavor, but I am also gravely concerned about the consequences if we fail.

Ministering to the spiritual development of all people through preaching, teaching, worship, and sacrament is at the core of the mission of the AME Church. In addition to these critical functions, I would add counseling as a vital part of the spiritual development ministry. As mental health has always been a concern that many pastors have attempted to address with congregants and community members alike, the church must be equipped with not only pastors who have the necessary tools and the ethics of confidentiality, but the church must be willing and able to address the concerns of mental health as an element of spiritual fitness. While it is an institutional responsibility, the means of addressing this concern has often been through pastoral counseling. The pastor's role as a counselor is as old and as familiar as the pastor's role as a preacher. Long before counseling was designated as a special function, and long before pastors received special training in counseling, the pastor was called upon as a trusted, reliable, concerned, compassionate, insightful counselor.[6] Without spiritual development, social and physical development cannot exist to the capacity to rise. Spiritual development must be the catalyst for all other measures of development to exist. The AME Church, since its inception, has

[6] Samuel D. Proctor, Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation (*Valley Forge, PA Judson Press, 1996):71.

creatively and consistently promoted through its programmatic structure for ministerial development, as well as through annual congregational engagements on issues such as sexual harassment, divorce, grief, and other mental health concerns, an investment in the mental fitness of both clergy and laity. A prime example of this intentionality is the law regarding all ministers who seek to be ordained as itinerant elders, who must undergo a psychological evaluation before being ordained for ministry in the AME Church. The law reads as such:

> *Each candidate (for itinerant ministry) shall be required to present a satisfactory certificate of good health and/or shall be required to submit to psychological and /or psychiatric tests and evaluation administered by a licensed professional and kept confidential to provide information on the candidate's fitness for the ministry.*[7]

The spiritual mission must begin with the equipping of spiritual leadership. While the leadership must be prepared to carry out this mission in a more diverse and shifting society, the spiritual leader must also prepare the congregation to develop an internal culture so that the mission becomes second nature to the persons who comprise the church. The AME Church has some of the most academically and spiritually prepared leadership that can be found in any denomination. The church must remain diligent in cultivating the spiritual foundation upon which it was built. Paradigms of ministerial application may be developed and implemented to address our current societal culture with shifting norms. Still, the spiritual foundation must remain the bedrock of our identity and focus.

The physical development of people has been and shall always present itself as the more demonstrative element of the mission of the AME Church. Physical Development, since the

[7] African Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Doctrine and Discipline,* 130.

social and spiritual, has its roots in scriptural foundation. While Jesus walked on water and calmed raging seas, He also healed the blind, the deaf, those with disabilities, the diseased, and those otherwise physically afflicted. In John chapter six, his miraculous provision aimed to meet the physical need of hunger. Not only does the AME Church do well in ministering to the physical development of people as it relates to need, but also in addressing the societal ails that prevent these needs from being met. Early in American history, as well as in this modern era, the task of physical development of Black and other marginalized communities would be a task to be taken up by the Black church. Raphael Warnock, in the book *Black Practical Theology*, asserts, "Nascent Black theologians rightly asked, how could white theologians – in their orthodox, liberal, and neo–orthodox variations – speak credibly about a loving and just God while refusing to address themselves and their work to the doctrine of white supremacy and its social manifestations in slavery and segregation?"[8] Thus, with this understanding yet being very much a part of our theological praxis, the AME Church continues to ministerto physical development through community engagement, and targeted programming at both the local and connectional levels to enhance the physical lives of persons with whom we share community and context. Persons are related to their sociopolitical context as parts are related to wholes. Neither has any existence apart from the other.[9] The connectivity that the AME Church shares with the Black community will always call for advocacy from the AME Church, especially in a divisive socio-political time like this. This has been and continues to be our call as African Methodist Episcopal Church members.

[8] Dale P. Andrews, Robert London Smith, Jr. *Black Practical Theology* (Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2015), 269

[9] Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches,* (Philadelphia, PA, Fortress Press, 1985), 57

Reflection on Spirituality

The spirituality of the AME Church is rooted in its doctrinal affirmation contained within the Book of Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church. While many creeds hold spiritual significance within the body of many Christian denominations, the Apostles' Creed and John Wesley's Twenty-Five Articles of Religion govern the belief system of most Methodist bodies, including the AME Church. Twenty-five Articles of Religion, a creed that was prepared by John Wesley, founder of Methodism, for the Methodist church in the United States. The creed was accepted at the Baltimore, Md. conference in 1784, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formally organized. The Twenty-five Articles was essentially an abridgment of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England that excluded references to specifically English situations and went beyond the original in excluding the strict Calvinist predestination interpretation, adopting a more general Lutheran view. In general, Wesley simplified and liberalized the Church of England creed.[10] However, while structurally, the doctrinal adoption of the Apostle's Creed and the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion provides a spiritual basis for belief, it is often not expressed in the lived experiences of the AME Church. Akin to many sacred and secular institutions, what is printed and what is practiced are often separated by vast distances. The Sunday morning experience is rooted in a wide range of expressions from ultra-charismatic to intellectually stoic, depending on what AME Church you may find yourself in. However, the spirituality expressed from sacred space does not always transition beyond the benediction of the worship experience.

In my pastoral journey, I, like many pastors, have been very pleased at times with the attendance on Sunday morning, only to be devastatingly disappointed by the seeming disinterest

[10] Encyclopedia Britannica. "Twenty-five Articles of Religion." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 16, 2009. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Twenty-five-Articles-of-Religion.

in Bible Study or other spiritual engagements that are designed to add to the Sunday experience during the week and in different ways. There appears to be a mastery of the spirituality of worship, but not so much when it comes to the individual and collective spiritual work needed to live a transformative existence that is demonstrated in Sunday sanctuary rituals and everyday life.

The preaching of the Word of God, the singing of both congregational hymns and choral selections rendered by a praise team or choir, and the collective and individual prayers that are offered up are the chief ways in which spirituality is expressed to God and with one another in the AME Church. While we do celebrate, or more accurately, commemorate, the two sacraments of the AME Church, which are the taking of Holy Communion and Baptism, the manifestation of spirituality appears to be equally binding of engagement and experience. While the singing and praying are central and germane to the spiritual paradigm of African Methodism, these elements have their genesis in the Black experience, not only in the North American diaspora but also in the hush harbor of antebellum slavery. This is particularly true as it relates to the homiletic tradition of Black preaching, which stems from African storytelling. For this reason, many Black Christians hold the Black preacher in a certain level of esteem that others cannot match. C. Eric Lincoln states, "The central figure in the Black Church is the Black preacher. He has no counterpart in the White Church, and to attempt to see the white minister or pastor on the same plane is to risk confusion, for the Black preacher includes a dimension peculiar to the Black experience."[11] The preaching moment crescendos the Black spiritual experience in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Even though many of our churches are now more ethnically

[11] Charles Eric Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion*. (Garden City, N.Y. :Anchor Press, 1974), 65.

diverse for various reasons, the preaching and proclamation tradition still anchors the spirituality of the AME Church.

I have been blessed to serve five AME congregations as senior pastor. My experiences have seemingly been a microcosm to a macrocosmic condition. As I speak with colleagues, visit their churches, or serve with them on the connectional level and at conferences, our parallel experiences symbolize the truth regarding our collective truth around spirituality in the AME Church. The truth is that we have a historical nature of understanding the traditions of spiritual Christian engagements. Still, we seemingly have lost the zeal for the exhibition of spirituality when it does not serve our denominational system. There are many AMEs who truly love God and are committed to the causes of Christ as they deem it to be, but we have not always been consistent in displaying spiritual freedom that leads to shared liberation. So is the challenge in my current congregation, the Greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville, TN. While the church is considered one of our historic churches, its current level of spirituality does not speak to a spiritual attitude of gratefulness for the grace of longevity but often exhibits an attitude of entitlement because of its financial standing. I will write more about that later in this project. In my current service at Greater Bethel AME Church, spirituality has taken a back seat to the culture of fellowship. I readily acknowledge the critical nature of fellowship in the church, as mentioned in the second chapter of the book of Acts. However, fellowship in that specific biblical reference was an outreach of spiritual empowerment, not social or communal connectivity. It is this cultural element that rivals the determination for spiritual growth. As a result, the church, while desiring to see growth, seemingly only an exhibit to see numerical growth and not spiritual growth. What has been absent, not only in this local church but also in

the overall connectional AME Church, is that a prioritization of spiritual growth would catalyze the numerical growth that is desperately needed and missing.

Reflection on Congregational Identity

The AME Church was founded in 1787 as the Free African Society but later became incorporated in 1816 as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The expansion of a fledgling group of newly freed slaves from worshiping in a blacksmith's shop to now being over 2.5 million members in over seven thousand local congregations located across thirty-nine countries is quite a miraculous move of God. Only 50 years after the incorporation of the denomination itself was the foundation for the Greater Bethel AME Church formed. In 1866, a group of approximately thirty Black Christians met in the home of Sister Ellen Calhoun, located on Tenth Avenue South, to organize a church. They named it Liberty Chapel. Meetings were regularly held until the members could secure the Reverend Henry Glasco as the pastor.[12] In 1868, the name was changed from Liberty Chapel to Little Bethel. For the next seventy-six years, through 20 pastoral administrations, the name was changed to Bethel, and a new building was erected at 1300 South Street, where the church currently stands. It is unclear when the name Greater Bethel was instituted, but it was changed to distinguish it from other churches with the same name within the Episcopal district. Through the years, Greater Bethel has been known for community involvement and innovative ministries to promote member involvement in the work of the church. It is a vital part of the representation of African Methodism, both locally as well as globally. It is this historical backdrop on which the churches' identity largely rests. The various

[12].Lucy High. "History of Greater Bethel AME Church." YouTube. Greater Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, August 12, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FxnA8OXBIM.

pastoral administrations in the history of Greater Bethel have a demonstrated track record of ministering to their contexts by developing ministries and addressing spiritual, physical, and administrative needs. However, at this juncture, the church finds itself having to make some unprecedented adjustments because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the natural concerns of attrition, the demographic problems of gentrification, and spiritual concerns of what the identity of the church in an ever-shifting society. Even with this myriad of challenges, the membership's faith rests upon its history of adjusting and adapting while maintaining a love for Jesus Christ and a devotion to African Methodism. We may be best described as a politically moderate, spiritually charismatic, and socially conscious church. We believe that we will survive through these new challenges and ultimately find a way to thrive.

Reflection on Programs

Programmatically, the AME connectional AME Church has various programs that it engages in on a broad level; however, these programs do not necessarily translate to local church programming. One of the reasons for this is that any program that would be mandated would have to be contextualized for diverse regional contexts. Considering the needs of churches with various geographical and demographic variations and different leadership styles would make this quite a challenge. Thus, the programs of Greater Bethel have been designed to address the spiritual and physical needs of the people and confront the issues that call for a liberation ethic in our community. This is a significant element in how the church's mission is met. It must be noted, however, that programs without partnerships often leave the church ministering to itself, and in so doing, falling short of the mission and purpose of the church as an institution. The AME Church as a denomination has always been about liberating marginalized people. The

programs that we develop are done with that liberation ethic in mind. On the connectional level, we stand with those who fight voter suppression, feed the hungry, house people without housing, provide additional educational opportunities for youth, work to bridge the digital divide in many communities of financially disadvantaged persons, and serve as a spiritual resource for those who seek comfort from the negative vicissitudes of life. To this end, the Greater Bethel has engaged in the following programs:

Water Walkers – a mentoring program for community youth

Blessed Revelations – A feeding program for youth during the summer months

Room In the Inn – An overnight sheltering a feeding ministry for homeless individuals

GED Preparation – Assisting individuals with obtaining their GED Certificates

N.A. – Narcotics Anonymous

Girl Scouts

N.O.A.H. – Nashville Organizing for Action and Hope (a grassroots community organization developed for political and social change)

ACP – Affordable Connectivity Program (a federally funded program that provides cash subsidies for low-income families to obtain internet access and electronic devices.

Back-To-School Rally – the giving away of school supplies to area children and families

Community Day – A Day where resources from various vendors interface with community members to assess needs and provide the necessary assistance ranging from utilities to landscaping.

Through these programs administered by and through the church, Greater Bethel has been able to keep a viable relationship with the surrounding community. The combination of ministry and mission keeps the church focused and centered on our interpretation of the ministry of Jesus Christ. As we seek to continue to grow our community relationship for more significant impact, a needs assessment needs to be undertaken every five years. We understand that due to various situations and circumstances, including but certainly not limited to politics, economics, and cultural dynamics, the community's needs yesterday may be different from what those needs

are tomorrow. To this end, there is an intentional effort on the part of the church to meet the congregational and community needs alike on an ongoing basis of problem analysis and program implementation.

Reflection on Capacities and Resources

In a conversation with one of the Bishops of the AME Church a few years ago, I was sharing with him my thoughts on the need for a reformation in the AME Church, to which he stated, "Yes, but even more than a reformation, we need a retooling." I never forgot those words because as my ministry began to crystalize in the local church that I was serving in the city of Saint Paul, Minnesota, I realized very quickly that many of the things I perceived needed to be done. I simply did not have the resources for. After having been trained in an overwhelmingly Black populated church, I now found myself in a pastoring a church with people of different ethnicities representing cultures. I remember having a membership in that church that consisted of Nigerians, Liberians, Latinos, European Americans, as well as African Americans. To make matters more challenging, the city was divided into wards, and in the ward where the church was located, there were over fifty-seven languages spoken. As one could probably assume, this level of diversity brought about some measures of entrenched division. Dr. Samuel Proctor states in his work with Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry,* that Given the institutional nature of these structural ethnic divisions, a pastor must be very intentional, deliberate, and focused on learning the history of the ethnic groups in our society, their origins, and their social, economic,

and cultural development.[13] My four-year training in the AME Church's Training for ministerial orders did not prepare me for this, nor did my four years of Master's degree work in Seminary.

As I navigated that difficulty, I once again found myself, and by extension, the church, not adequately prepared for ministry in today's context. The preparation of the minister and the congregation's capacity must be raised to a level that matches the needs of our growing congregation and shifting community. The church must now be a viable partner and advocate in the fight for land acquisition, a key source of affirmation for those left vulnerable to the cruel political winds that blow across our geographies, and a staunch defender of the humanity of all people. I have found that our denomination, as well as the church I serve, desperately needs the retooling that the bishop spoke to me about many years ago. It is not that we do not want to do what we believe God has called us to do, but we are often ill-equipped to take on many of our contemporary tasks. Building relationships has proven to be difficult to serve in a gentrified community because we are not necessarily provided the benefit of ethnic commonality. Our resources and capacities equip us to be what we have been in days gone by, but not necessarily what we need to be in the present moment. Whereas in times past, simply having willing workers may have been enough to keep the church as the center of information and activity in the community, we now find ourselves in need of grant writers, language interpreters, trained counselors, legal experts, technical support, health advisors, political activists and a host of other skills that were not needed in the past.

I believe that our church has many resources that are needed today, but they have gone horrendously untapped. Many people who possess the gifts and graces I mentioned previously

[13] Proctor and Taylor, 113.

are often unsure how their skills and talents fit within their perception of the church. Even today, many people still only have a religious and spiritual outlook that embraces the experience they engage in on Sunday morning, but not beyond that, or if it is embraced, it is left to “others" to do. I am, however, encouraged because I believe that we can grow into a new understanding of what it means to be the church today. This, however, will be a congregational shift led by myself as pastor. As Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy, chapter one, verse six, I must implore them to stir up the gift within them. Our denominational leaders are not often swift in embracing change for various reasons. I understand that nothing will change until the thinking changes. Some are vested in maintaining the status quo of how we think and perform missions and ministry. If we fail to equip ourselves with adequate training and become devoid of fear of those who possess this training or skill set, as though their sole purpose is to remove and replace those who currently occupy seats of power, the resources and capacities to do great things will be left by the wayside. Our church is filled with physicians, lawyers, educators, business owners, administrators, and professional individuals whose talents would not only serve the church well in performing our missional tasks but are critical for the survival of the church. So, yes, our church has the resources, but far too many of our members have separated what they do on their jobs and personal lives from what God may be calling them to bring into His church. My spiritual father once told me a joke about a church during a building program for a new worship edifice. He said that after growing frustrated with how slow the donations were coming in for the program, the pastor stood up on a Sunday morning before delivering the sermon and announced to the congregation that all the money for the building program was now in the building. Upon hearing this, the congregation began to rejoice, only to be interrupted by the pastor who stated, “Now the only question is, will you give it?” This sums up my reflection on the resources and

capacities of our church. They are most certainly present; my task is to develop a congregational hunger for sharing our individual and collective expertise.

Reflection on the Theological Paradigm

As a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, I am well acquainted with the understanding that our denomination was founded by people of African descent, who, in protest of ecclesiastical discrimination, left the established white Saint George's Methodist Church. That act of defiance not only drew a social line between White and Black Christians but a theological one. Relegation to worshiping in the same place, but not in the same space, was an injustice that was tolerated until one day, it became too much to try to assimilate to a worship structure that valued white worship and prayer above Black worship expressions. Declaring theological justice is an act of defiance against white supremacy. Still, also it is the demonstrated faith in a belief system that values all people as equal in the sight of God. Since the days of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the descendants of Africans have been made to believe in the white-washed version of the Christian faith. This erroneous indoctrination has led to a falsified theology in many Black Christian denominations. It was Albert Cleage Jr. who stated that for nearly five hundred years, the illusion that Jesus was white dominated the world only because white Europeans dominated the world…the historic truth is finally beginning to emerge that Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation, Rome.[14] I would submit that the founding events of African Methodism produced one of the earliest models of redemptive justice.

[14] Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, New Jersey: First Africa World Press, 1989), 3

The tenets of thrift, self-help, and stewardship are rooted in the theological perspective of the AME Church. Our theological paradigm is spirituality, liberation, biblical interpretation, and social engagement. We believe that the call of God for the life of the believer must not only be demonstrated in the manifestations of spiritual disciplines but must also exhibit a demonstrative concern for the spiritual, physical, and mental well-being of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. At the Greater Bethel AME Church I serve, we strive to demonstrate a theological model that speaks to the community through service and the congregation through ministry engagement and spiritual equipping. The components of bibliology, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are all germane to the theological paradigm of Greater Bethel and the Connectional AME Church. We aim to embody a holistic approach to the Christian faith. Our theological paradigm is specific enough to remain rooted in principles, but it is also flexible enough to adjust how it shows up in an ever-changing community. With the current condition of culture wars, changed norms in many of our existing institutions, including the church, and the divisive political climate, our theology anchors our faith and serves as a compass for what we need to do in this hour. One of our guiding biblical texts is 2 Chronicles chapter twelve, verses thirty-two, which speaks of the sons of Issachar who understood the times to know what Israel ought to do. The times necessitate action, but action should be rooted in the theological paradigm. At the local church, we can and have been able to enact practices that meet the times' needs, while the church hierarchy seems to move much slower, even though the governing theology is the same. There is a need to bridge our theological gaps between generations and often, between genders. We agree on what should guide our theology, but very often divided on how it looks and what issues are most pertinent at this time for the future of our denomination. At Greater Bethel, we lean into demonstrating a

contemporary theological understanding of the times while believing that the principles of our existing paradigm will allow us to establish a Christian ethic to both the church and the community.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapters two through five are each described below.

Chapter 2: Analysis of the Challenge

This chapter presents an analytical perspective on the issue of young adult inclusion from a micro and macro context. Particular attention is given to the biblical and spiritual implications of marginalizing young adults. This issue of exclusion is presented as a critical concern facing the future of this historic denomination. Consequences for a failure to act and the urgency to address this problem guide the information contained in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Guidance from the Activist Leader (Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram)

This chapter highlights the experiences and spiritual pedigree of a retired Bishop of the AME Church. The career and accomplishments are noted alongside an early interest in the inclusion of young adults into the life of the local and connectional church. His impact upon the current challenge is spotlighted in this dissertation for reflection as well as projection.

Chapter 4: Methods

This chapter describes the methodology utilized in this dissertation project.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter presents the findings and supporting information to validate the issue of young adult marginalization as a challenge but also provides informative discourse for the proposal of solutions to the problem. The experiences and perspectives of five young adults, two clergy and three laity, are chronicled and fueled into a solution-oriented context to produce tools that can be utilized to assist and ensure the inclusion of young adults in critical roles within the local and connectional church contexts.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter describes the limitations and implications of this project. It also provides considerations and predictions on the state of the denomination if the warnings of this project still need to be addressed. It also offers a wealth of possibilities for future study, which would address the limitations of this project.

Chapter 2: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This chapter is comprised of several components. It will start with a statement of the problem and then proceed to a contextual exegesis. This exegesis will also include some ramifications of the problem and the urgency to address it. This section will provide the context out which the challenge arises. From there, a biblical justification will be explored. Following the biblical justification, some proposed required changes will be stated and the expected outcomes of these proposed changes. The chapter will conclude with three ministerial competencies being engaged concerning the presented challenge.

Statement of the Problem

In March of 2020, the world as many of us had known it came to a sudden halt, as the COVID-19 global pandemic hit the United States, which included, but was certainly not limited to the Christian church in this country. This devastating health crisis caused the church to rethink, reimagine, and retool to maintain relevancy and operational effectiveness. To this end, the church had to engage in technological education and demographic health analysis of its congregations and communities to be equipped to meet this current crisis. In addition, we must give acknowledgement to the reality of the social justice impact of the year 2020 upon the Christian Church in America. Between the global health pandemic, the oppressive racial injustice that made news headlines igniting global demonstrations for justice, and a contentious political cycle, the church was surely impacted adversely. However, for Black Christians, these issues did

not cause a massive falling away or a newfound disillusionment with all that the Black church has done, and what it yet means to many communities across this country. As stated by the Barna Group in their work, *Trends in the Black Church: Celebrating its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future,* "The truth is that Black churchgoers are the bellwether of resilient U.S. Christianity. Though not immune to broader trends of religious decline, Black Americans stand out as faithful, prayerful, and intimately acquainted with the Bible."[15] If we are to address the trends of decline, then we must address it among its most critical constituency, that being young adults or millennials. For clarity, I do not believe that any demographic is more important than another, for indeed we serve a God who is no respecter of persons (Romans 2:11), however the decline in the attendance and affiliation is most notable amongst young adults. For some perspective, see the tables listed from a study conducted by the Barna Group in the work which bears out these difficult realities. The Barna Group research states:

> For the most part, both churchgoers (34%) and non-churchgoers (41%) say there is nothing they would change about the Black Church experience. Where is the room for improvement? Approach to money, service length, youth programming, and the use of technology are the most popular choices. Young Black adults, especially those outside the Church, hope for social changes such as greater inclusion, community, and opportunity.[16]

Note the following charts from this study conducted by the Barna Group:

[15] Barna, *Trends in the Black Church: Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future*. (Ada, MI: Baker Books. 2021, 7
[16] Ibid., 47.

Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
22% length of service	22% length of service	17% Approach to money	17% Approach to money
19% Programs for teens	17% Approach to money	13% length of service	15% Use of technology
19% Opportunities for LGBTQ	14% Programs for kids	13% Use of technology	14% Programs for teens
Other	Other	Other	Other

Characteristics That Black Churchgoers Wish Were Different

The Unchurched Perspective

Is there anything you did not enjoy about your experience in a Black Church?

Base: Have attended a service at a Black Church

30%	17%	15%	14%	10%	41%
Approach to money	The service itself	Congregation dynamics or makeup	Church membership	Church member community and culture	None of these

Here are a few key differences across the unchurched age spectrum as noted by the Barna Group study:

Gen Z + Millennials	22% Approach to ministry	11% Lack of opportunities to be in the community	11% Lack of opportunities for certain people groups	10% The Programs offered
Gen X	32% Approach to ministry	5% Lack of opportunities to be in the community	5% Lack of opportunities for certain people groups	4% The programs offered
Boomers + Elders	33% Approach to ministry	5% Lack of opportunities to be in the community	5% Lack of opportunities for certain people groups	2% The programs offered

I see this reality being lived out in the city I currently serve, Nashville, Tennessee. While many churches were slow to return to in-person worship, the devotion to local church worship and denominational loyalty remains strong. With the new paradigm of hybrid worship, that being in person and simultaneously online, the Black church, while not being a monolithic institution, remains steadfast in its religious devotion while displaying a diverse and evolving expression of what it means to be a faith institution. Included in that context are Black millennials or young adults. Contrary to stereotypical beliefs regarding a lack of young adult affinity toward the Black Church, there are many who have a vested interest and a spiritual investment in the Black Church. However, as the charts from the Barna study indicate, there are some concerns which must be addressed. As I have witnessed the villainization of young adults regarding their outlook on church and church attendance, I have concluded that misconception often leads to misunderstanding. In the Greater Bethel AME Church where I currently serve, there was a glaring absence of young adults when I was first assigned there in November of 2022. However, one year later since my arrival, I have noticed that many young adults have returned to both in-person as well as online worship. However, they have either stayed or returned bearing the scars of unresolved church hurt from the past.

Pastoring a historic church which was founded in 1866, in a denomination which was founded in 1787 and incorporated in 1816, is at times a contradictory duality of being both a blessing and a burden. It indeed is a blessing to serve a church with such rich traditions and a spiritual heritage that dates back for generations. It is a blessing to serve the descendants of those who have endured the tumultuous days of heinous segregation and violent oppression. I am always honored to share in their stories of generational struggles and successes. I love to hear the accounts regarding the various locations where the church gathered to worship, leading up to the

present location where we are now. Indeed, historical content and context is a blessing. However, it can also be a burden when so many of our senior members seem to be caught up in the web of nostalgia which does not allow them to embrace the present opportunities for a new dispensation of God's grace. They are often blinded to the distinct possibilities of an even brighter future. It can be burdensome to see young adults come to church with spiritual enthusiasm for the worship experience, hoping to get closer to God through their personal expressions and understanding of faith and worship, only to be met with someone who may make an incendiary comment about their attire or their lack of a generational claim of affiliation. What I have come to observe is that different generations tend to view church differently regarding the expectations that they have of the church. Many of our seniors view the church as a part of their inherent spiritual culture, but also a place of cultural relevance as well. Many of our young adults have a different expectation of the church. While they give a nod of agreement to the viewpoint of the older generation, they wish to see a spiritual institution that is empowered and emboldened to make an impact on the issues of the world, both personal and communal. Their expectations go beyond a traditional understanding and identification of the church and embraces a contemporary vision of the sacred institution not just being a religious organization with a central gathering place, but an active organism in the greater community. As Dr. Brianna Parker states in her book, *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age,* regarding this treatise, "This work unveils a generation of Black millennials who are concerned with service, justice, and cultural progression and who have maintained high hopes for the Black church."[17]

[17] Brianna K. Parker. *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church For Black Millennials in the Tech Age. (*Mansfield, TX: Black Millennial Café, 2018), 25.

In a structural setting like the AME Church, which has a distinct hierarchical order due to its episcopal governance, there is also a non-written cultural understanding that leadership and key decision-making and decision influencing positions are often reserved for the more seasoned members. Such is the case in the Greater Bethel AME Church. Many young adults have left the church over the years, per many of the church officers. Those millennials who have either stayed or returned to the church credit the young adult departures unresolved conflict in the church with members of the older generation, a lack of representation in key leadership positions and what has been perceived as the suppression of their voices on critical matters. In this era where the application Zoom is utilized in churches to conduct everything from meetings to conferences to worship experiences, this demographic often found their voices to be muted by those who served as, what I would call the generational hosts of the ecclesia. Those who have remained or returned hold feelings of uneasiness due to the severity of their experiences, either realized, perceived, or observed. However, lest I relegate this age group to a monolithic camp of malcontents, it is important to attempt to provide a more comprehensive description of who they are.

To bring light to the diversity within this age group we call young adults, I reference the work of Dr. Brianna Parker, as she describes four different personalities within the millennial group that a particular portion of her work focuses on. Dr. Parker states, "I interviewed four individuals for the sake of creating a more holistic picture, dispelling the myth of a monolithic generation, and providing a narrative that would help those interested in Black millennials and faith to understand who was in their midst."[18] The first was a 19-year-old Black male college student in Texas from the Midwest. He was raised by his grandmother who never took him to church. His faith experience began at the age of 12 when he moved to Texas with his father and

[18] Parker, *What Google*, 72

his stepmother. The second participant in Dr. Parker's study was a 34-year-old African American woman who is a single mother of a tween son and who is an employed, licensed professional counselor, holding a master's degree and is also an entrepreneur. The third participant was a 29-year-old man who, as Dr. Parker states, "is the millennial that elders hate and the poster child for why the millennial generation is going to hell in a handbasket…in their eyes."[19] Dr. Parker describes him as arrogant and proceeds to show in her interview some of the stereotypical nonchalant beliefs that many elders despise in this younger generation. The fourth participant in her study is a 24-year-old Black college graduate who is currently unemployed and a bit disgruntled about the major she chose. These very distinct personalities are likely to be present in many local churches and mainline denominations today, and they certainly are very present in the AME Church and in my local church context. Without understanding the diversity within the age group, it will be impossible to meet their spiritual needs and use the diversity of their gifts. It is now the work of this local pastor as well as the denomination in which I serve to harmonize what Joshua Mitchell calls this "intersection of Millennials and Christianity."[20]

With a membership of over four hundred people in Greater Bethel AME Church, and the majority being persons over the age sixty, there is a desire to see younger people visiting and joining the church body. However, we often struggle to find the balance of meeting the needs of one group without offending or neglecting the other. Edward Hammett states that "In all probability, keeping the sixty-plus crowd happy almost always assures that the church will reach few new people under the age of forty."[21] It is this dilemma that the Greater Bethel AME Church

[19] Parker, *What Google,* 78
[20] Joshua Mitchell. *Black Millennials & the Church: Meet Me Where I Am*. (Valley Forge, VA: Judson Press, 2018): xi
[21] Edward H. Hammett. *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60: Being Church for All Generations*. (Nashville, TN: Chalice Press, 2007), 4.

in Nashville now faces, and not only this church, but the AME Church as a denomination overall. I often tease my colleagues who have multiple worship services by telling them that they have the option to separate those with different appetites for the worship experience and different ideologies of church identity into two or three different time slots on Sunday morning. However, those congregations like Greater Bethel that have one worship experience must find the balance of not only worship but also the total complexity of religious and spiritual life. It has been my experience that in the AME Church, when conflicting concepts of the church and its mission are present, that the older generation tends to "win out" 100% of the time. Yet, it leaves the older generation in a state of lamentation when these young believers depart for other religious and spiritual experiences, more akin to their way of expression, thinking and spiritual prioritization. Still for many, this concludes their faith in the church as an institution of relevance, but they yet maintain a belief in God.

This type of suppression was most notable to me at the connectional level of the AME Church at the 2021 General Conference of the AME Church. It is at the General Conference where the legislative body of delegates comes to vote on new legislation to govern the denomination and elect General Officers and Bishops. The chart below depicts the marginalization of the young adult voice on the critical matters concerning our denomination, as young adult representation was just below 6% in a voting body of 1,517 persons, representing 39 countries across 20 episcopal districts, representing over two million members. Out of that context, only ninety persons were identified as young adult delegates to the four-year gathering of the oldest protestant denomination founded by persons of African descent.

Delegation Statistics for the 2021 AME Church General Conference[22]

EPISCOPAL DISTRICTS IN THE UNITED STATES	TOTAL NUMBER OF DELEGATES	NUMBER OF YOUNG ADULT DELEGATES	PERCENTAGE OF YOUNG ADULT DELEGATES
1st Episcopal District	121	6	4.95%
2nd Episcopal District	120	10	8.3%
3rd Episcopal District	80	2	2.5%
4th Episcopal District	93	1	1.07%
5th Episcopal District	102	7	6.86%
6th Episcopal District	111	6	5.4%
7th Episcopal District	107	12	11.2%
8th Episcopal District	71	4	5.6%
9th Episcopal District	80	5	6.25%
10th Episcopal District	80	4	5%
11th Episcopal District	118	6	5.08%
12th Episcopal District	76	4	5.26%
13th Episcopal District	73	5	6.84%
TOTAL FOR UNITED STATES DISTRICTS	**1,232**	**72**	**5.8%**
EPISCOPAL DISTRICTS OVERSEAS			
14th Episcopal District	34	2	5.8%
15th Episcopal District	56	0	0%

[22] Conitras Houston, "Minutes of the 51st Session of the General Conference (Vol 1.1)" Last Modified (n.d.) Accessed on October 23, 2023, https://www.flipsnack.com/9A6A7EAA9F7/minutes-of-the-51st-session-of-the-general-conference-vol-1-1.htm

16th Episcopal District	39	2	5.1%
17th Episcopal District	40	3	7.5%
18th Episcopal District	29	5	17.2%
19th Episcopal District	61	5	8.2%
20th Episcopal District	26	1	3.8%
TOTAL FOR OVERSEAS DISTRICTS	**285**	**18**	**6.3%**
TOTAL NUMBER OF DELEGATES	**1,517**	**90**	**5.9%**

Contextual Exegesis

Greater Bethel is located on the southside of Nashville, TN, just two miles from downtown Nashville. The city of Nashville is home to 15 colleges and universities within its city limits and offers a multitude of post-secondary educational opportunities in its immediate surrounding area. This provides hope for a younger generation of Christians to associate with and become a part of the Greater Bethel AME Church. Although the immediate neighborhood where Greater Bethel currently sits has been gentrified, this, too, must be viewed as an opportunity for the church to become a more diverse and expanded institution. To see and seize these opportunities requires change. Change is not always easy, but always at some point in time becomes necessary. One of the changes that must be embraced is the intentional inclusion of young adults in key leadership positions, decision-making processes, and in the casting of the vision for the future of the institution. With many of the congregations in the AME Church becoming older and as the median age continues to increase in the local church, attrition will be, and in many instances has become a grave threat to the existence of the church as it stands

currently. This is also a grave threat for the prospects of future existence and relevance. We must deal with what President Barack Obama once called "the fierce urgency of now." As a member church of a global denomination, Greater Bethel is a microcosm of the denomination, and as such, experiences the same maladies on a smaller level. Change never happens from the top, so an expectation that the 21 Bishops can shift the cultural dynamic is unrealistic. This renaissance must take place at the local level of individual congregations and then filter up to the higher levels of the church. A failure to enact systemic change with an intentional aim towards the future will ultimately place the church, at both the local and connectional levels, in organizational hospice, where we will only concern ourselves with being comfortable as life slowly slips away.

Biblical Justification

Throughout the pages of both the Old and New Testament of the Bible, persons who would have been deemed as young adults have played a significant role in the biblical narrative. As it is stated in the Bible, "For there is no respect of persons with God." (Romans 2:11 NKJV). We have various protagonists who have had and continue to have significant impact and influence upon our theological understanding. If we are to live out the will of God for our lives, that must be inclusive of being open to whoever God chooses to use for the satisfaction of His will. However, just as we struggle with this very notion today, we also see that it was an issue in the time of the biblical texts. When we consider the prophet Jeremiah, who was hesitant to accept his assignment as a prophet of God because of his age, we understand that he not only had a deep respect for the elders of his community, but also a grave concern of rejection merely based upon his youthfulness (Jeremiah 1:4-8 NKJV).

When we consider that Solomon was a mere 20 years old when he became the king over Israel, it is nearly impossible for us to fathom that a person so young could lead a nation, yet God gifted him with a wisdom far beyond what many would think his years suggest (1 Kings 3:6-12 NKJV). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a teenage virgin when she was found to be pregnant with Jesus, yet it was Mary and not a more biologically mature woman who was chosen for this great assignment (Luke 1:26-35). David assumed the throne of Israel when he was only 30 years of age, after having been anointed by the prophet Samuel when he was only 13 years of age (1 Samuel 16:11-13, 2 Samuel 5:1-4 NKJV). Esther was a young adult when she literally saved her people from genocide and became a queen (Esther 2:15-18, 7:1-10). In the prophetic book of Joel, the prophet states that God will indeed pour out His spirit on all flesh, both old and young. He goes on to indicate that sons and daughters would prophesy and that older generations would dream dreams and the younger generation would see visions (Joel 2:28 NKJV). Even Jesus was only 30 years of age at the time of the beginning of his earthly ministry (Luke 3:23 NKJV). Elihu, who speaks in the book of Job from chapters 32 to 38 indicates that because of his age he did not speak upon Job's calamity because he thought that Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar should speak first and make sense out of the recent occurrences of Job's life. However, when he discerned that they could not answer Job in an appropriate manner that spoke to the sovereignty of God and the righteousness of His judgements, he spoke his position on the matter before them (Job 32:1-12 NKJV). If we as Christians hold fast to the notion of the Word of God being at least one of the chief tools that we have to know who God is, or moreover, if we subscribe to the doctrine of *prima scriptura*, and most certainly that of *sola scriptura,* then surely we must take note of the use young adults in the plan of God from the Old Testament persons previously mentioned, to New Testament personalities such as Mary, Timothy and John Mark.

Too often the Bible is used for proving doctrinal disputes, but not necessarily for providing the model of inclusion that our churches and our greater society so desperately need. It must be noted that this issue of generational marginalization existed even amongst those who walked with Jesus. Addressing the issue of the suppression of young adults is not only supported by scripture, but I would say that we as Christians are mandated to create and cultivate climates of inclusion which are not bound by generation, gender, or any other element of human diversity even as Jesus did when He walked the earth. Jesus, particularly in the gospel writings, proved to be an inclusive figure, as He ministers to children (Matthew 19:14 and Mark 10:13-16 NKJV), women (Luke 8:43-48 and John 8:1-11NKJV) and foreigners (Matthew 8:5-13, Matthew 15:21-28 NKJV). If Jesus could be intentional regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, so should we who claim to follow His teachings and examples. Unfortunately, as it relates to young adults, our biblical understanding has not always translated into biblical practice.

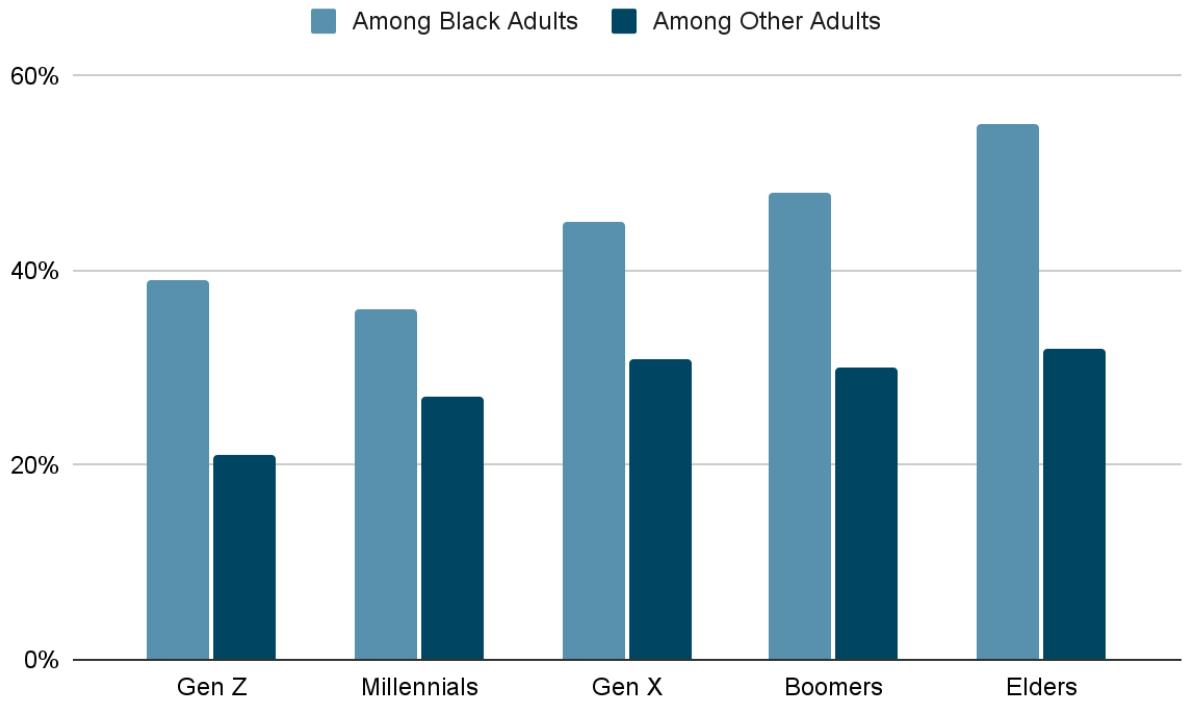
Required Changes

According to studies conducted by the Barna Group, the decline in persons who identify as Christian seem to be increasing.

> Alongside the drop in Christian identity, we see corresponding growth in the proposition of Black Americans who call themselves atheist, agnostic or of no faith. Still, on all points, Black individuals are more likely than people in other racial categories to hold Christian beliefs. By generation, all age groups are similarly working out their responsibility to talk about their faith, though younger Blacks adults differ in their view of God and their confidence in scripture.[23]

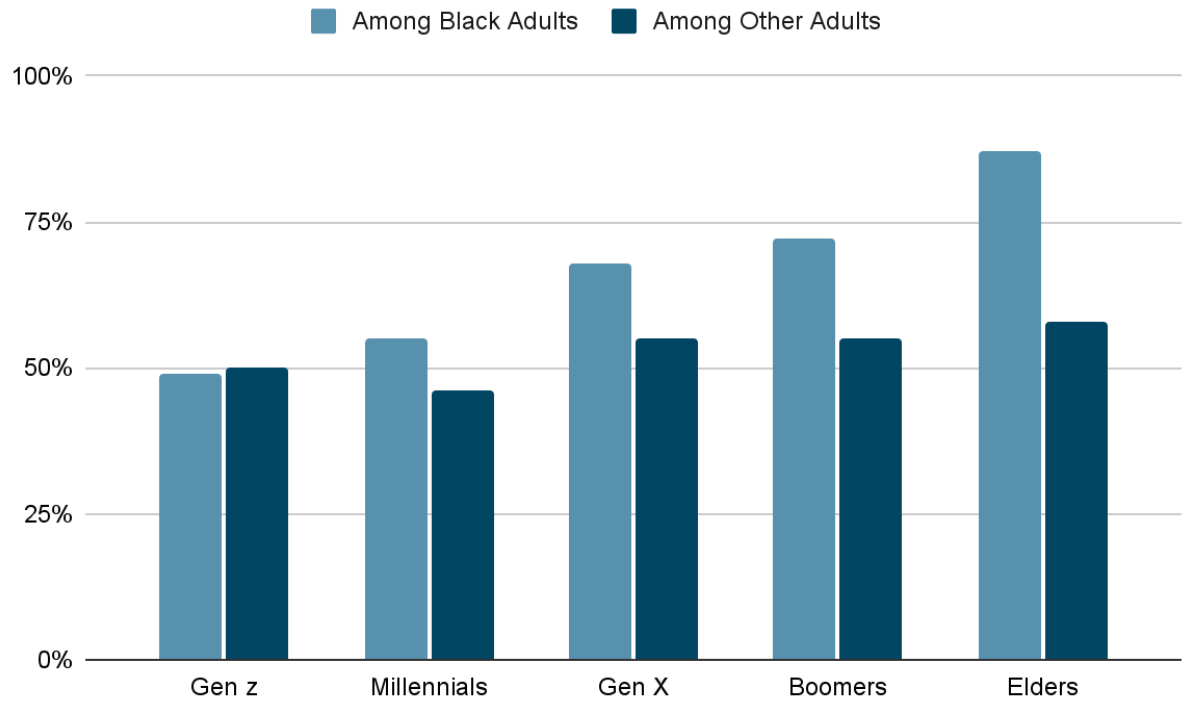
[23] Barna, *Trends*, 26.

According to this same study, 36% of Black millennials and 27% of non-Black millennials agree that "the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teaching."[24]



Given this information it becomes imperative that the church begins to expand its understanding of how an individual may encounter God. Sources such as other written material and personal experience must also be listed amongst the valid avenues that a person will develop their faith perspective. Barna indicates that 55% of Black millennials and 46% of non-Black millennials believe that "God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today."[25]

[24] Ibid.
[25] Barna, *Trends*, 27.



Given this information, we must look at the institution of the church in determining what has seemingly driven away this age group in such large numbers. In my personal context, many young adults who have left the church often cite church hurt and continuous conflict as reasons for leaving, in addition to the lack of inclusion. At the very first church that I served as pastor, the Saint James AME Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 2002, many young adults became disenchanted with the church when their appointments to key positions within the church was met with resistance from many of the older members. This is a narrative that has repeated itself throughout my tenure as a pastor of AME churches in three different states, across two different episcopal districts. Very much akin to the reasons for affirmative action laws to be passed in this country, that being the denial of equal access to opportunities and resources, the AME Church will have to implement an affirmative action-like law to ensure inclusion, foster cohesive transitions, and maximize the totality of the gifts and talents within church on the local, district

and connectional levels. While legislation is the chief instrument of the AME Church as it relates to making significant change, I, like many others, realize that legislation is not enough. Legislation without a cultural shift will only result in forced compliance or fierce resistance. The church needs the tools to cultivate a cultural climate that is cohesive to the changes needed to bring about young adult inclusion and young adult promotion of the institution.

As Dr. Brianna Parker states, "I want to give Black churches, businesses, educational institutions, and civic organizations concerned with Black millennials both the voice and concerns of my generation, so they are emboldened to create circumstances that are appropriate for and conducive to organic millennial expression."[26] While my aim is not necessarily directly inclusive of other institutions outside of the AME church, I realize that I must be open to the notion of their inclusion for two very distinct reasons. The first reason is that the AME Church must be in partnership with other institutions of like values and ethics to accomplish the mission of the church, which is stated in the book of Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church as ministering to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people.[27]

Secondly, a holistic approach must include other institutions because many millennials are members of civic, social, service, and political grass-roots organizations. Those passions of involvement must be incorporated into the life of the local and connectional church. We are also in need of a strategic plan that provides church leaders at every level, a tool which can be utilized to aid in the evangelism, inclusion, training, and utilization of young adults. In 2007, the AME Church developed a draft of a strategic plan designed to address the identified weaknesses and threats within the AME Church, which were identified through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses,

[26] Parker, *What Google* 26.
[27] African Methodist Episcopal Church. *The Doctrine and Discipline*, 21.

Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. A part of that specific plan involved the addressing of young adult departure from local AME congregations as well as the lack of young adult inclusion in positions of authority at both the local and connectional level. To date, we have yet to develop the tools necessary for addressing these concerns. While many churches desire to see young adults in their pews and working in their respective ministries, the ability to accomplish that end, yet evades them due to their ineptness to understand the spiritual and social needs of this young adult generation. While in some instances it is not so much a need to understand as it is a need to be open to a new way of doing things and a new way of understanding young adults. A lack of understanding often lends itself to an absence of mentorship and succession planning. When many young adults speak of mentoring experiences, they sadly describe molding experiences. Rather than being cultivated according to the gifts that are in them, they are often faced with paradigms of cloning, where they are forced and forged into the mode and model of what came before them. A perfect example of this notion was stated by Jeffrey Johnson II, the Associate Pastor of Eastern Star Church in Indianapolis while speaking in a panel discussion from The Bible Is Black History Institute entitled: *The State of the Black Church* when he tells a story regarding his maternal grandfather. Johnson states:

> When my grandfather passed, he left my mother, his daughter, these frames that he would always wear. She sent a picture of the glasses that he wore to my brothers and I and said, "check out these glasses." So, I thought that they were brand new glasses, but what she did was, she took the frames and replaced the lenses with her prescription. So, she is now viewing life through the framework of her father. Unfortunately, we have handed over a framework to the millennial generation where we see through a glass "whitely", having adopted this white supremist look, not just when it comes to church, but when it comes to gender relationships, managing money, taking care of our households and everything that we view in life.[28]

[28] "The Bible Is Black History." YouTube. October 4, 2022. "The Bible Is Black History." Https://Www.Youtube.Com/Watch?V=Jx46KBCLhWQ&T=267s. October 4, 2022. Accessed 11/14/2023.

Expected Outcome of Changes

One of the anticipated outcomes of implementation of the changes proposed in this project will be a re engagement of millennials into the church setting, with a particular interest on making the gospel message relative to their daily lives. For many millennials the gospel message has historically lacked a contemporary relevance which would address many of the issues and circumstances facing their generation today. Joshua Mitchell states that, "One of the things that seems to be working in traditional settings is the promulgation of a more relevant gospel message. Millennials are deeply interested in things that directly affect our daily lives. We tend to be a lot less interested in theoretical messages and much more interested in praxis."[29] It is this inability to minister to, or associate with the millennial generation which has led to a great misconception about their views on spirituality and the church. Dr. Brianna Parker states, "the ill prepared engagement of millennials delivers, at the very least, frustrations and challenges to program effectively. Millennials are assumed to have attempted to avoid or leave the Black church, because they see no value in the history or future of organizations that have been most relevant to their communities.[30] This project aims to make a difference by not only bringing about an awareness to the misconceptions that have been perpetrated upon the millennial generation, but also to provide a tool in which to address some of those misconceptions. It is through these continuing efforts of understanding and enlightenment of historical theological positions which tend to be ineffective with millennials that effective ministries, programs, and a more concretized presentation of the gospel can be implemented. This in turn would promote millennial involvement with the institution of the AME Church on all levels, encouraging not

[29] Mitchell, *Black Millennial*s, 41.
[30] Parker, *What Google,* 27.

only engagement but equal participation in critical decision-making processes, leadership development, civic engagement, and vision casting. While this is not expected to be an instantaneous change it will indeed serve as a catalyst for the process of moving the AME Church both legislatively and culturally to a more inclusive organism of young adult participation.

To initiate the changes which are needed to bring about a more inclusive and generationally diverse environment within the AME Church for young adults, several resources are required. A combination of exit interview data from young adults who have left the AME Church, the information from the previously performed SWOT analysis and strategic plan from 2007, a new strategic plan which lays out proposed solutions to be implemented at all levels of the AME Church for millennial engagement and inclusion, targeted legislation which calls for the inclusion of the Richard Allen Young Adult Council (R.A.Y.A.C) involvement in all levels of the five conference system of the AME Church. The conference system consists of the following:

(1) The local church conferences.

(2) The Presiding Elder's Quarterly Conference.

(3) The Presiding Elder's District Conference.

(4) The Annual Conference.

(5) The General Conference.

Every local church must engage the process of interviewing young adults who have departed their local congregations. A standardized exit interview shall be conducted by all local churches to ascertain the reasoning for the millennial departure. This information, along with data from the previously conducted SWOT analysis as well as the information included in the

proposed strategic plan will be used to develop a new plan to be adopted by all local churches in every Episcopal District. The R.A.Y.A.C. shall submit proposed legislation which shall require the connectional church to provide designated inclusion in all committees and delegations at the General Conference as well as mandate that all local church leadership boards shall be 25% young adults where possible according to membership demographics.

This new plan must be inclusive of all critical voices to insure effectiveness in its application. Therefore, all Bishops, General Officers, Presiding Elders, stewards, trustees, missionary presidents, Y.P.D. (Young People and Children's Division) presidents, Lay Organization presidents, class leaders, Christian education directors and RA.Y.A.C. leadership on all levels shall be invited to, and are essential for the effectiveness of this process.

Ministerial Competencies

In consultation with the site team, it was best noted that the competencies in which we would pursue for this project are those of a theologian, a prophetic agent, and an ecumenist. While other competencies may have some relevance, and there will certainly be some overlap of other competencies, those three speak to who I am and the role that I occupy at the local and connectional church respectively. In addition, it was our opinion that the other competencies would not provide adequate application to the challenge from the standpoint of being agents of change regarding young adult inclusion in and of themselves for this project.

The theologian should be a critical thinker and a student of both cultural and biblical context to provide a more comprehensive perspective to those to whom they are communicating. The theologian engages actively and biblical study and theological reflection in the context of the

contemporary world, to continue to grow and become more effective and interpreting the word in a particular time and place. The qualifying word that was suggested in adhering to this competency is continue. The theologian should continue to be a critical thinker and a student of both contemporary cultural and biblical context to provide a more comprehensive perspective to those to whom they are communicating. Demonstrated traits of this competency included the following:

- Training in biblical or scriptural studies.
- continued and consistent study of scriptures.
- working knowledge of other disciplines.
- Studies of a variety of theologians /exegesis to gain a diversity of perspectives.
- The ability to relate the word to the world and the world to the word, both locally and globally.
- Understanding of the doctrines of the church.
- Understanding of the historical development of the community of faith.
- Ability to reflect theologically upon experiences and lifestyles.
- Ability to recognize ethical implications of problems and move to an ethically justifiable posture.
- Ability to enable other persons to work through the process of ethical decision making.
- Desire to grow theologically and maintain professional vitality.
- Ability to make theological relevance of the issues communicated by young adults.

It was determined that this competency was met with a satisfactory level of effectiveness. It was suggested that I continue the path of theological methodology and application that has been and is currently being demonstrated in the local and connectional levels of the AME Church.

The prophetic agent must not be confused with fortune telling. Prophecy in the Bible is more than a matter of ecstatic speech uttered through the power of the Holy Spirit (although it can manifest in this manner) and much more than merely telling the future (although it certainly has a strong eschatological dimension). As a prophet, a minister speaks the truth in love, communicates an awareness of social injustices, and sensitizes others to the spiritual and ethical implications of various structures and practices in the church and on the broader society. The qualifying word for this competency was continued. To this end, the candidate demonstrates:

- A commitment to the transformation of the world.
- Sensitivity to and/or empathy with victims of social injustice.
- Skill in analyzing social structures and diagnosing the roots of social problems.
- Ability to translate institutions about needed change into specific strategies.
- The ability to discern the ethical implications of strategies for change.
- A willingness to embrace risk to create social change.
- An ability to communicate to others a passion for justice to inspire change.
- An ability to involve others in seeking social change, to create group ownership, and to build coalitions.
- An awareness of their own cultural location and biases and the global implications of their commitment and or actions.

It was determined that this competency was met with a satisfactory level of effectiveness. It was suggested that I continue on the methodology that has been and is currently being demonstrated in the local and connectional ministry.

The ecumenist must possess an open mind and a heart that accepts differing values, mores, beliefs, and practices. “Ecumenical” comes from the Greek word meaning the entire inhabited world. An ecumenist ministers effectively in a global context, pays attention to the holistic nature of humanity, religion, and belief systems, while attending to the mission of one’s faith tradition. An ecumenist encourages interfaith dialogue and understanding and seeks to engage in activities promoting the universal community's peace or well-being. The qualifying word for this competency is develop. To this end, the candidate demonstrates most of the following:

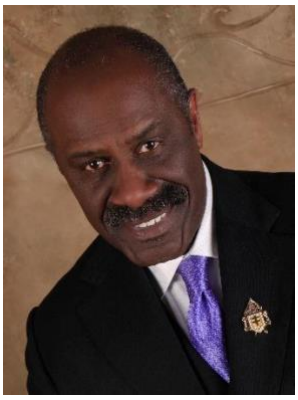
- Knowledge and appreciation of other denominational, confessional, cultural and religious traditions.
- A willingness and ability to foster dialogue and understanding across the denominational, confessional, cultural, or religious lines.
- An ability to provide structured opportunities for interdenominational, multicultural, and multi-faith worship, education, and action.
- An ability to inform the congregation of the needs, concerns, and Community involvement of other congregations and groups.
- A willingness to learn from other traditions and be challenged by other faith traditions.
- Sensitivity to issues of proselytism and past histories of conflict, common oppression, and violence.

It was determined by the team and candidate that more intentional efforts should be made to reach out to other congregations outside of our denomination. While there is always an emphasis placed on the connection with sister churches within the denomination, the issues of our local and global community call for a broader reach. While some efforts have been made to this end, it was determined that much more should and needed to be done.

Chapter 3: THE ACTIVIST

This chapter is dedicated to the chosen activist for this project, Bishop Gregory Gerald McKinley Ingram. It will begin with the biography of Bishop Ingram, followed by a brief introduction to the relationship between Bishop Ingram and the candidate. The chapter will then move to a brief history of the Oak Grove African Methodist Church in Detroit, Michigan, where Bishop Ingram was elected as the 118th Bishop of the AME Church. The chapter will conclude with the transcript of the Zoom interview conducted by the candidate and the activist.

BISHOP GREGORY G. M. INGRAM (RETIRED)



Gregory Gerald McKinley Ingram is a native of Detroit, Michigan. In 2000, he was elected and consecrated the 118th Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. From the time of his election until he retired in 2021, Bishop Ingram has served the church well as a bishop in the Fifteenth, Tenth. On July 4, 2012, during the 49th Quadrennial Session, he was assigned the Presiding Prelate of the First Episcopal District.

Committed to his vision as an aspirant for the Episcopacy, Bishop Ingram actively remained conscious of the needs of the community. He continued to unfold his initial 7-Point Partnership Plan to the 10-Point Partnership Plan that culminated into 10 Guideposts strategies for improving the quality of life for people and the church. Bishop Ingram has served as a pastor of A.M.E. churches in Chicago, Springfield, and Alton, Illinois, and for two years served on the religious staff at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville Campus.

Before his election to the Episcopacy, Bishop Ingram served as the Senior Minister of Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit, Michigan. During his 12 1⁄2-year pastorate, the church prospered numerically and financially, resulting in over 2600 people uniting in membership, and more than 1,420 were inspired to become tithers. As the pastor of Oak Grove, he liquidated all the church's debt, including a multimillion-dollar building and expansion project paid off in five years. Upon his departure and elevation to the episcopacy, he left the church well secured with more than $1.2 million in treasury.

Bishop Ingram has distinguished himself throughout African Methodism in particular, and the religious community in general, for his expertise on stewardship and tithing. He has authored several books, including *The S.A.T. Manual on African Methodism: A Study Guide for New Members*, *Equipping the Saints for Service, The Joy of Giving More Than Enough,* and *The Pastor's Journal and Quarterly Conference Record Book*.

This ecclesiastical activist was privileged to serve as the chairman of the General Conference Commission for the 49th Quadrennial Session and host bishop and chair of the two hundredth anniversary, the Bi-Centennial, of The African Methodist Episcopal Church. During the Bi-Centennial celebrations and events, he was the compiler and editor-in-chief for the devotional book Moments in Meditation Celebrating the Bicentennial of the African Methodist

Episcopal Church and *The Encyclopedia of African Methodism: Bicentennial Edition*. He is the visionary behind the Richard Allen Statue and Memorial Courtyard, which graces the Mother Bethel AME Church, and along with his wife, Rev Dr. Jessica, the beautiful massive Richard Allen Mural that adjourns The First Episcopal District Headquarters on 38th and Market Street in Philadelphia.

This AME Bishop has had the privilege of serving as the chairman of the Board of Trustees for The African Methodist Episcopal Church Inc., Payne Theological Seminary, and Paul Quinn College, Dallas, Texas.

Emphasizing personal education, he holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wilberforce University, a Master of Arts degree in Teaching from Antioch College, a Master of Divinity degree from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary. He is also a recipient of six honorary doctoral degrees. He is a life member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, and is a thirty-third-degree Mason-Prince Hall Affiliation.

Bishop Ingram is married to The Reverend Dr. Jessica Kendall Ingram, and they are the proud parents of a daughter, Jennifer (son-in-law Gregory) McCoy, and grandparents of two granddaughters, Jayda Eman' and Gabrielle.

Personal History with The Activist

I met Bishop Gregory G.M. Ingram on Easter Sunday of 1996. At that time, he was the Oak Grove AME Church pastor in Detroit, Michigan. The church was a vibrant, youthful, and Progressive Church. This was much to my surprise, it being an AME Church. Reverend Dr.

Gregory Ingram was a very charismatic leader, a passionate preacher, and a distinct visionary with a plan for the church's future and an appreciation for its history. The church's motto was "called to make a difference," which the church appeared to embody in all its facets. It was the first time in my experience of the church that I had seen a church that was invested in the community to the point where properties were purchased for low-income families, another housing was purchased for persons re-entering society from incarceration, and a fully functional daycare was in full operation in the lower level of the church facility with a complete staff. This church had a distinct and intimate relationship with many local homeless shelters and businesses. Reverend Dr. Ingram, along with his wife, the Reverend Dr. Jessica Kendall Ingram, were a clergy couple, a paradigm I had not seen before and one with which the AME Church still struggles today.

Bishop Ingram was born and raised on the east side of Detroit. He is the third of four children born to his parents, who were also lifelong members of the AME Church. Bishop Ingram preached his trial sermon at 18, and upon graduating from Pershing High School on Detroit's east side, he enrolled at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio. While a student at Wilberforce University, Bishop Ingram was also engaged in the four-year ministerial process for ordination within the AME Church. However, because of his transportation struggles from Wilberforce University to the Michigan Annual Conference, where the Ministerial Institute would meet with the candidates for ordination, Bishop Ingram did not complete the process in the allotted 4-year period. Still, he took ten years to finish his ordination due to educational obligations. Upon completion, his ministerial career was launched as he was assigned to pastor his first church, the Trinity AME Church in Alton, Ill. After a short stint as the Pastor of Trinity AME Church, Ingram was elevated to pastor of the St. John AME Church in Springfield, Ill.

Bishop Ingram began to distinguish himself as a master pastor and a prolific preacher while serving as pastor of this growing congregation. At this pastoral charge, his ministry began to get noticed, not only in the denominational confines of African Methodism but in the global Church community as well. His Excellence as a pastor at St John AME Church in Springfield, Illinois, ultimately led to his promotion through the itinerancy of the AME Church, sending him to become the pastor of the Historic Quinn Chapel AME Church in Chicago, Illinois. The continued success that Bishop Ingram achieved while pastoring this iconic church ultimately led him to be reassigned to the Oak Grove AME Church in Detroit, Michigan. At this church, Bishop Ingram and his wife, Reverend Dr. Jessica Kendall Ingram, began to establish themselves as connectional figures within the denomination context and global figures in the ecumenical landscape.

His Church

Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal Church began in 1920 as a Sunday School class. A small group of committed Christians was faithfully dedicated to holding weekly meetings in the residence of Mrs. Cornelia Davis. Before Oak Grove became an official organism of African Methodism, it owed so much to the tandem guidance and leadership of Reverends B. E. Evans and V. L. Eckridge. Growth and development caused the assemblage to move to Lockport Public School for adequate housing, and under the leadership of Reverend Marshall Pearson, it became fully accepted into the Michigan Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The church's original name, "St. Luke," was changed at the request of the Conference because a church bearing the same name was already in existence. Thanks to the vision and the keen

insight of Mrs. Martha Hughes, who noted that the church was in an area distinguished by the splendor of many beautiful oak trees, it was easy to understand why she suggested the church be named "Oak Grove."[31]

It was in 1921 when the church's men built the congregation's first church home with their hands and labor of love. Mr. Nelson Smoot, a member and master carpenter, designed the master plans for the new church. This small wooden structure was on the corner of Kentucky and Chippewa Streets. The building was known for its bell tower. The bell gave the clarion call to the faithful members to worship on Sunday mornings and rang when a member passed from labor to reward. In approximately 1926, the beloved bell in the tower came crashing down when the wooden church burned to the ground. It had been tolled for the last time. Fortunately, the Women's Club, under the presidency of Mrs. Cornelia Davis, had taken out fire insurance coverage on the church building, which provided funds to erect another facility. With the funds from the insurance policy, Mr. John Howard, a trustee, was instrumental in securing the down payment for a new Oak Grove. On August 26, 1928, the congregation laid the cornerstone for the second church structure, this time made of brick.

In 1959, the congregation of Oak Grove relocated to the corner of Cherrylawn and Pembroke, its present location. Shortly after, in 1961, Reverend David E. Mitcham was appointed pastor. During Reverend Mitcham's tenure, the church broke ground for its current building. Construction began on March 5, 1967; on April 17, 1968, the congregation worshiped for the first time in the new church. The congregation grew during Reverend Mitcham's pastorate, and the need to expand the facility to accommodate various church programs and more

[31] Oakgroveame.Org. Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal Church, Accessed November 15, 2023. https://oakgroveame.org/.

space for worship became evident. On Sunday, August 2, 1987, the church broke ground in developing its facilities.

On October 19, 1987, Reverend Gregory G. M. Ingram was appointed the ninth minister to "shepherd the flock." Three months after Reverend Ingram arrived, the plans of the expansion program were enlarged to accommodate even more space for worship and to include the expansion of the daycare center. The church successfully secured a bank loan, which, at the end of the construction project, would exceed two million dollars.[32]

In 2000, shortly after Dr. Gregory G.M. Ingram was elected Bishop, Dr. Robert Brumfield was appointed Pastor of Oak Grove. Under his leadership, the church continued to grow and prosper. In 2019, after 19 years of prosperous leadership, Dr. Brumfield was appointed Presiding Elder; at that time, Bishop John Franklin White appointed the first female, Reverend Cindy Rudolph, as Senior Pastor.

Oak Grove has truly been blessed by the ministry of twelve pastors between its inception and the present. They were: Rev. B.E. Evans (first pastor), Rev. V. L. Eckridge (second pastor), Rev. Marshall Pearson (1921-28), Rev. A.W. White (1928-30), Rev. Samuel C. Davis (1930-32), Rev. William Walker (1932-42), Rev. Robert A. Schley (1942-51), Rev. L.L. Lawrence (1951-53), Rev. James Dixon (1953-61), Rev. David E. Mitcham (1961-87), Rev. Gregory G.M. Ingram (1987-2000), Dr. Robert E. Brumfield (2000-2019), Rev. Cindy Rudolph (2019 - Current.)

[32] Oakgroveame.Org. Oak Grove African Methodist Episcopal Church, Accessed November 15, 2023. https://oakgroveame.org/.

Interview

Byron Moore:

Thank you for your time and consideration for allowing me to interview you today, Bishop.

In your pastoral ministry at Oak Grove, you were very intentional about having ministries for young adults and bringing in mentors and young adult preachers consistently. Did you see that as a need for the continuation of the church or something to help vitalize church growth? And what was your mindset behind that? You were very intentional about bringing in young preachers and young professionals.

Bishop Ingram:

Well, I think that, fundamentally, if the church is supposed to be an embodiment of all people, then certainly, you know, you must have those young adults that you're talking about. But also, I remember in my earlier years, two groups of persons that sometimes are often overlooked, the very young and very old. So, I was very intentional about making sure that the church was represented by all groups. And it did not hurt that when I pastored Oak Grove it was a young adult church. The average age was about 42 to 44 years of age. We were very intentional about that. I can also say that at my second church, St. John AME Church in Springfield. Yeah. Because of exactly what you're saying with the young adults, we created a special Bible class, we called it "1942." It was composed of persons from ages 19 to 42. They were part of that Sunday school class, and it really turned out to be a wonderful experience. So, I think you're right on target with that.

Moore:

Okay. And was that born out of the congregation that was there? Or did you see a need to try to attract that age group to create that ministry?

Bishop Ingram:

Yeah, I think that again, you know, I follow your lead, and what you're saying, you must be very intentional. If you don't engage and involve young adults and young people, you're not going to get them. Often that older person should but doesn't want to relinquish leadership if you will. And I wanted to make sure of that transition; in addition, I want to keep my own mind fresh. Some young adults helped with that aspect. And, I was at that time when I was at Oak Grove, I was 40 years of age when I went there. I'm 40 years old as the new pastor. Oh, yeah, and I was elected a Bishop at the age of 52. So, I'm going on 53. So, you know, like minds attract like things, I think. Right.

Moore:

Right. Okay. From your viewpoint as a bishop, do you believe that attrition is the major issue of our day? Well, let me phrase it another way. How dangerous is attrition to the church at this time, particularly post-pandemic, where we are much more technological than we were pre-pandemic? Do you think that attrition, in addition to the notion of a hybrid church, has caused

many members to now give up young adult evangelism, and young adults not being there is a great threat to the church?

Bishop Ingram:

You know, I think we got a lot of threats. I think we've been a little bit overzealous in this matter about technology. To the extent that if we're not careful, yeah, we become more of a mechanical, technological society. And we get into socialization and the process of communicating with each other in more indirect ways. Yeah, one of the real dangers is that if people are making a migration, leaving the church, because in some instances, they don't feel welcome, and I know in the church, this whole membership attrition that you talked about, I mean, you got the ebb and flow. Yeah, every 20 or 30 years, the church has a pendulum and swings in and out and if we're not careful we'll become became just like the European church, to the extent that we're not going to have people in the church period, and it's not all post pandemic or pre pandemic, it's something more. It says more about us really than about the pandemic. It's giving a lot of people a lot of alibis and excuses for not coming to church too.

Moore:

Given that, what would be a recommendation or some things that you did as a bishop or even as a pastor in your pastoral ministry to attract and maintain young adults.? Because you're right; we had a lot of these things before the pandemic. The pandemic is blamed for a lot of things, but some of this stuff, a lot of it was going on prior to the pandemic, I think the pandemic highlighted it. So, given that, what would you say to attrition?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, I know that when the pandemic initially hit, I was very intentional about keeping people engaged and involved to this extent, that I had weekly dialogues and conversations. When I pastored a church, I would purpose every day to call two members. When I was a bishop, I was very intentional about calling the pastors and lay persons and young people, because I wanted them to know, they were not after-thoughts. During the pandemic, we created a document and I'll send that to you. It was called Pastoring During the Pandemic, and it was a 582-page document. It was quite effective, so much so that some other folks were looking at it, and even the Black Museum was looking at it. So, we were very progressive in that endeavor, and you know, we had messages coming from pastors, lay persons, young people, it contained music, book reviews, we had a whole gamut. And we brought a lot of different people in on that effort so that people again felt as though that it was not the church scattered, but the church gathered. So, I think that's one of the things we must do, make sure that we have inclusion in all things.

Moore:

You mentioned something very key there about bringing them to the table for vision casting and program development. How important is that? Or do you see a lack of that across the length and breadth of the church and how important was it in your ministry?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, as you know, when I aspired for the episcopacy, I created a document called the Seven Point Partnership Plan. That plan eventually evolved to the 10 guideposts. This was a part of a document entitled The Big Picture. In The Big Picture, we laid out a lot of things in terms of visions, and what we wanted to do. Unfortunately, sometimes we get caught up in a lot of mantras and a lot of themes and subsequently, we don't follow through with it. When I created that 10 guideposts, we brought 100 people together, young people, older people, musicians, I mean, we bought the whole gamut, because this would impact the life of that district. So, it was not just my vision and my desires. It was what we as a church wanted to do and it worked out very well. So, we followed through with it. Every year, we would have something about it and add to it. Okay.

Moore:

That's good. Let me let me shift a little bit. Did you see a difference in young adult inclusion across the districts you serve, particularly when you were overseas in the 15th episcopal district versus the 10th episcopal district or the 1st episcopal district.

Bishop Ingram:

I think everybody, all the districts have the same need. I don't think there's a distinguishable difference between them. The fact of the matter is, I do think that we must be, to use your expression, very intentional about bringing people together. Now, if you don't take time to talk to

people, or spend a little time trying to get to know them, then, you know, you're not going to have that much engagement with them. I think the higher we go in positions, the more intentional you must be because sometimes it's almost like you're hands off once you're promoted or elevated to a higher office. You know, it's not how high you get sometimes it's how low you are regarding connecting with people.

Moore:

That's good. What do you feel about young adult inclusion in the legislative process? Is there enough or should there be more? This is where, for us as AME's where the rubber meets the road a lot of times.

Bishop Ingram:

Well, I think we must be a little careful about legislation, because it can sometimes drive you away, as opposed to including you. Persons are never drawn so much by policies, as much as they are by basic principles that will make people feel wanted. Sometimes we create laws and legislation to exclude things, as opposed to include things and people are never drawn necessarily by legislation, by laws, as much as they are by love.

Moore:

You made a very powerful point there regarding the issue of policy versus principal. Did you see a difference in principles? Better stated, what was what was critically important to the younger

generation versus what was important to the older generation in both your pastoral and your Episcopal Ministry?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, you know, that's kind of a difficult question to grapple with to this extent; Now, I'm not saying that we don't need it, it being legislation because we do. However, I do think that it is critically important, particularly in this time, that overall moral leadership and everything else is needed, but also, this principle of bringing people together in an atmosphere that lends itself to people, much like what you're talking about now, feeling a part of the whole. I'm not sure that we have necessarily done that with legislation. We have more laws than we can shake a stick at and then don't follow them all. All right, so we create laws and laws and laws, and lack implementation. The fact of the matter is in our last General Conference, it was only two pieces of legislation that was passed. If you're not careful, you won't have that many people to deal with because of the damage that legislation can cause.

Moore:

And that was one of the things that rolls right into my next question, because I looked at the total delegation of the last general conference. We had a total of 1,517 voting delegates at the General Conference, less than 6% were young adults. Yeah, less than 6%, 5.8% to be specific. There were a total of 90 young adult delegates across all 20 episcopal districts. That's what brings me to that legislative piece. Are young adults adequately represented in those numbers?

Bishop Ingram:

I think that's something that, you know, you can unpack and deal with that statement. Because when you look at the average church or congregation, you're not looking at young adults and young people as much as you're looking at the older people. Again, you have to create an atmosphere that attracts and maintains young adults. This is a real challenge for us now. Because the church is graying and getting older and older and older. So conversely, that's what you're going to have as delegates. The other piece to that is this, as you know, in our own legislation, particularly in terms of representatives, the person had to be a certain age. They got to be a member of the church for so long. You also have folks that are very guarded in reference to the status quo. Do you know the phrase regarding territorial rights? Yeah, there are some folks that guard the gate because they don't want anybody coming down behind them. Further, they really don't want new leadership in some instances. So, you got those people who've been protecting and guarding their own self-interests. What is it going to take to get an interesting mixture or integration of the two? Maybe we ought to have term limits even in terms of delegates. Because there must be less recycling and really a renewing of the mind. That also must translate to not only the General Conference, but also, we must be looking at the local church simultaneously.

Moore:

I remember in the 2008 General Conference in St. Louis, there was a bill that hit the floor that talked about 75 being the age limit regarding stewards and trustees and folks almost caused a

riot. It was immediately rejected, as someone made a motion for deletion, and it was done quickly.

Bishop Ingram:

Why do you think so?

Moore: I think it goes back to what you just mentioned about guardianship. But then also, there were some pastors who even said, if we do that, I won't have any officers at all, which speaks to the lack of young adult presence. So that the lack of the presence, I think, also played a key role in that as well. But that's an interesting concept about term limits.

Bishop Ingram:

Yeah. Sometimes you can let more out than you can let in. And that's even the whole dynamic about this retirement piece? You know, everything is on its own time. You can't put people in before it's their time, but you also can't exclude people that you think time has passed. I used to have a phrase that says, 'it is one thing to have opportunity, and you're not ready, it's another thing to be ready, and you have no opportunity.' So how do you blend and bring the two together? One of the great things is to look at the maturation process or the Maslow theory of looking at the needs. We have a lot of needs in this church. In terms of persons, you know, we are really at a point now, when you look at those persons who are aspiring for the ministry, we're lacking a lot.

Moore:

And that creates a problem, even on the other side of things, because we have more churches than we can fill, so we have extended the age for ordination from 50 to 60 to accommodate that need. We're also asking retirees to come back and quote unquote, "supply churches." Is there a belief that anybody younger should take on these greater tasks of pastoring, or in some instances pastoring multiple congregations? Particularly where, there was a problem that may have been created before they got to the ministry, where attrition and gentrification have significantly impacted the church.

Bishop Ingram:

Well, I think that, you know, you raised a lot of different issues to this extent. First, you've got to have an atmosphere created, that people can have meaningful and significant dialogue. To this extent, I know, Avery Dulles, in one of his books, talks about the models of the church as well as Lyle Schaller. You got some situations, you know, where there are four or five persons in one church and then a mile away, you got another church where there are 25 members. This constitutes a situation where leadership and laity should be talking, not at each other, but talking with each other. Again, because you have to create an atmosphere where we can deal with vested interests. It would be to our interest if you merged them. I did a couple of mergers when I presided as a bishop, because you must see the real significance and need of it, while not getting lost in the process and not get angry. This raises the issue of how do you create community? Because in many instances, we're not as close as we think we are. So, because of that, you got

some persons, like deacons and sometimes not even have deacons, you got exhorters and you got lay persons filling voids, where we lack clergy, particularly younger clergy. Well, you know, if you're doing that just to maintain I mean, what are you really creating? What are we doing? I think that's a real concern for our future. How does our future look? What is the church going to look like? We had Tod Bolsinger to come and do one of our lectures when we were dealing with that pandemic. He spoke to us about canoeing the mountains and navigating uncharted waters. This is a time now where the church really must think differently. In many instances we are being forced to do so. We've got to think differently. You can't continue to do the same thing that we've been doing. The whole world is changing, so the church must change as well. Change is the great order of the universe.

Moore:

You said something very key, in that you hit one of my buzzwords, community, which is a big word, particularly in social justice ministry and liberation ministry overall. When dealing with this notion of creating community, many young adults as well, at least the ones that I've talked to for this project, spoke about the lack of community overall in a church. They find it with one another, but not in the institution. When I asked them, what did they attribute it to, they said, sometimes, our spiritual needs and our social outlook differs. Many of them view church as an organism that should be making an impact outside the walls of the church, to be involved in the justice issues, to be engaged in the needs of that community. Whereas your older members have an affinity towards that, but they're much more driven inwardly. What has been your observation regarding that differentiation?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, let me say this. One of the greatest pastimes in all the world is for people to throw stones at the church. To the extent that the church is not relevant, non-existent, and lacking communal impact. The black church has been around for a long time. One of the things that seemingly emanates with the younger generation is nothing has transpired until they came on the scene. This is not so. We go back to talking about how do you create community? First, you have to have an appreciation for both. I'm not sure that we have created an atmosphere where folk are able to come and sit down with each other across generations. When I was young, and part of the movement itself, you know, unlike many in this generation, there was a certain reverence that we did have for those who came before us. I'm not saying that people don't have a reverence for it, the previous generation, but it's not as much I think, as it was. A whole lot of things in terms of equity and social responsibility, moral thought and all that comes up regarding these issues, I think that's important. I applaud the young people of today who are working on these issues. I mean, the Black Lives Matter movement, women's movement, all of this is important work. This work is really representative of the church too! So, I think that one of the big challenges for all of us, particularly in the social justice movement, is critical because you can't be a good Christian if you're talking about trying to better yourself, that's what Jesus is about. He's slowly and surely challenging systems and challenging institutions to make things right by being representative of all people, not just one select group.

Moore:

You mentioned something relative to that just a second ago about platforms where we're talking with each other. That is interesting, because one of the things I asked some young adults for this project is, 'What is it about the older generation you admire, and you wish they knew you did? Conversely, what is it about your generation that you wish they admired? And to a person they all talked about, an appreciation for what came before them. This is amazing to me, because that doesn't always translate in terms of people knowing you appreciate them. One individual stated, "Well, I must admire that generation because all my heroes come from that generation. If I love Martin, if I love Malcolm, if I love Medgar Evers, they were the age of young adults. They were R.A.Y.A.C. folks in age at the height of their prominence. However, they felt that those in that group who are now the seniors, give them difficulty. Some of the older folks say I wish the younger people knew we were not averse to their methodology of worship or how they view the church. We just want to make sure that if we change practice, we don't change principle. You know, back to what you were saying about talking with each other? What are your thoughts?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, I think that you hit the nail on the head with something. So let me go back and kind of unravel one or two things. Great movements never start from the top down, but always from the bottom up. And movements, particularly in terms of advancement often take place with young people, not older folks. Yeah. I mean, when you look at the old Civil Rights Movement, it was basically young adults. We used to say, old men for counsel young men for war. I think the only way you will not get old is if you die young. Now, the issue is, how do you pull them along? I

have preached a sermon on old ropes and old rags. I talked about the significance of these things. Because something is old does not mean it does not have value and worth. The rope significance is about pulling somebody because somebody helped all of us. I'm in that latter part of the senior citizen group, but I tried to keep a young enough mind, so I can try to understand and have an appreciation and an affinity to the younger generation. Because, you know, life is about continuous education. So, you'll never stop learning. The issue now for us is, again, and you mentioned it, bringing all these people together, because we see it right in front of us. The question is what are you going to do about it? Yeah, and it's not enough to keep on saying it and knowing and taking no action, simply pointing out issues or making a diagnosis or pointing fingers, will not be sufficient. You mentioned legislation, but that's not the answer. We've got leaders that must bring people together, both young and old and we'd be surprised at the positive and powerful outcomes. Serendipitously, we might come up with something. So, let's pray that's going to prevail.

Moore:

You spoke about the stability and the longevity of the black church. I was listening to Gardner C. Taylor talk about the state of the black church back in 2003, in Detroit. Tavis Smiley asked him, what's wrong? You know, what's wrong with the black church? Just an open-ended question. Gardner Taylor said, “It is not as much church as it is supposed to be.”[33] He said, basically, if we maintain a continuity of transfer of principles, you know, from one generation to the next, we

[33] "Dr. Gardner C. Taylor - State of the Black Church." YouTube. Tavis Smiley, February 10, 2003. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6f4k1GpOR0&t=39s.

would be healthier. However, he warned that when we deviate from this, we tend to lose some of our power and some of our credibility. Yet and even still, with its faults, it is still the only institution that we control. So, it's still the best thing we had yesterday, and have today. And so, with that, with that control, that institutional control, the question on the floor was, have we or do we become kind of what we have fought against? You know, do we oppress one another? Do we suppress ourselves, even as we work against the oppression of our people by others outside of us? Do we turn inwardly with an oppressive mindset which contributes to the lack of young adult support or stability within the church?

Bishop Ingram:

Let me put it this way, I'm dealing with this matter about value and worth lately. If we don't value certain things, it's not going to be worth anything. Now, how much are you worth? How do you value a thing, and the only way to deal with that is, you've got to look introspectively. What's our goal? What do we really want? You mentioned Gardner C. Taylor and the question that was raised by Tavis Smiley, let me go back and deal with that with you. Look at the mission of the church, the AME doctrine says that our mission is to minister to people socially, spiritually and their physical needs. Well, you know, I've been on this issue for some time, that it seems to me, we should be spiritual first and then other things, right. We're not totally social, we should be spiritual first and then social. I think it's time now for all of us to come together and see the best interest of everybody, not only socially, not only spiritually, but economically. We've been dealing with these issues for years and we're not there yet. So, when do you think we will ever arrive? We don't. It's what Tillich talked about when he lifts the notion of being and becoming. We are in process. You have motion and sometimes with this pedestrian mentality, people come

and go. However, in the coming and going, you got to sit there long enough to say that we have a mission, and we have a purpose, and we have a goal. I think realistically, every church should have an identified mission. As you well know, it took us almost two years to come up with a mission statement when I pastored Oak Grove. I was very intentional about that because everything had to center around that. What was our mission, what was our theme, I think about our mantra, everything was about the core values of that church and I'm not sure that people even think like that, but you should.

Moore:

Absolutely. You mentioned, from the mission statement of the AME Church, that the priority you talk about should be spiritual first. It seems like we have that, in some instances, however in others, it seems like that's, you know, almost an assumption. Given what just happened recently, particularly regarding politically and socially, with a heightened sensitivity to justice, can we address these things without leaving out our spirituality? I agree with you, I think we ought to be spiritual first above and beyond all things and everything else ought to emanate out of our theology. Do you see where those things have shifted? Can it be a healthy coexisting, or how should we approach that in terms of making sure we're holistic in our approaches to our issues?

Bishop Ingram:

I think you said something that speaks volumes and that is, we go on some basic assumptions, we assume. So, there is real danger. I think that you can have peaceful coexistence with all of them, but I think it also is incumbent upon us to have a real meaningful dialogue and lay those

priorities out. We sometimes have major meetings with small agendas, which are very disappointing. I think that every time we come together, I try to do that as a bishop, and as a pastor, to have meaningful gatherings that promote progress and continuity. When you leave a general conference, there should be some marching orders. To say, like, Paul, this one thing or two things or three things we want to do. Now we know what the budget's going to be, we know this, but what is it that we're really going to do? Yeah, and I think that that's where we have been missing some things. Because at that point, if you really have those overarching goals, there should be one or two things that every episcopal district would know that this is what we're going to do. This would kind of curtail some of the stuff we're doing, and I think we'll be more mission minded and more driven than we currently are. I think that that enables people to say, Oh, that's interesting. Now, again, when you look at the church, I'm saying AME Church, because I applaud us more than other mainline denominations. When you look at the things that the AME Church has accomplished, in our existence it far exceeds others and I'm not putting any other denomination down. I'm telling you what the AME Church has accomplished educationally, socially, economically, and spiritually, it has done a phenomenal job. What could happen if we really came together cross-generationally, as you're saying and focused centrically, relative to goals and objectives and say to the world, this is what we can do.

Moore:

That leads me to a couple of questions and we're almost done. When I talk to young adults, it's like a duality, the more they learn of it, and know it, that is the history and accomplishments, the greater appreciation they have. But then conversely, the greater frustration they have, because they say, why aren't we doing this now? So, I get it on both ends. So, I see what they're saying

regarding this frustration. I mean, my friends who are not AME read a book of discipline and go, man, this is it! Y'all got it, and then take our structure and they turn around and use it locally in their churches. I had a couple of young adults who expressed that frustration in this project. What are your thoughts on this?

Bishop Ingram:

I use a phrase; you can't have myopic vision. There's some that see and some that don't. There are some that are doing it and there are some that are not. You can't put everybody in the same basket. I mean, literally, some districts and some local churches, and some pastors are really doing that, the social and the spiritual with a generationally diverse approach. Yet, it raises the whole question about mindset, work ethic, and a lot of things, you know. There are some people that have passion solely for social justice, while others express passion for other things, spiritual and otherwise. A few years ago, everybody was in this whole prosperity gospel. So again, I go back to the pendulum swinging both ways. Yeah, that's again, having an appreciation for everyone and the young adults who can easily get overlooked when we get too rooted in nostalgic paradigms.

Moore:

Okay. Last thing I have for you Bishop, concerning talking about leaving meetings with marching orders and making sure we're distinct on what we ought to do when we leave the meeting. That it's not just a big meeting with a small agenda. The late Dr. Mack King Carter always says when you get done preaching, you ought to leave the people with some homework,

and you ought to have some. When you get done, they ought to have something to do. What would be the homework that you would subscribe for our church, as we're moving forward to create these platforms of inclusion? What do you think is the most critical priority of our homework?

Bishop Ingram:

I think, again, when you look at the work of the church, and we have these legislative convo meetings, there should be more than just looking at legislation for the upcoming General Conference. We ought to be saying, here are some real goals. Here are some things we want to address. Yeah. And I think, at some point, this is the significance of leadership. That is the bringing of people together to say, we cannot continue to go the way we've been going. So, you bring some of these analytical, critical creative minds together. We have strategic collaboration across the board, and particularly the young people, because they have not always been included in the critical processes, though their voices have been needed. We must think out of the box. I mean, embracing creative ideas. When you add this to the older people who've seen and experienced some of the things that we see now from a basic root perspective. And, you know, the tragedy is sometimes people die with a lot of good ideas going on to the grave with them. Yeah. So, I think it's high time now that we bring a composite of all that together in documented and recorded format, so we create a continuum. What have we written down for the folk who are going to follow? Where is the blueprint of the future? What are we writing?

Moore:

Right!

Bishop Ingram:

What are we saying? If you go back and you read some of these older books that the fathers or mothers wrote which call for us to now go back and read again. The Romance of African Methodism, or you look at Dr. Dennis Dickinson's books, and many preachers in politics, you read that? These things would help all generations to develop a new blueprint for going forward, because they provide a foundation of where we've been and how we got here.

Moore:

Dr. Dickerson just gave me a copy of his most recent book a few Sundays ago to read as we were talking about some of the things you just stated, and things he recently just shared with me.

Bishop Ingram:

Let's go back and look at what the church looked like 100 years ago? What does it look like now? Yeah. I tried to address this issue in the Episcopal Address I wrote for the bicentennial celebration back in 2016. What took place in the first 100 years of African Methodist Episcopal Church from Richard Allen until now, and the role of generational involvement. So that speaks to your position of young adult involvement. When I put that together, I was intentional about their inclusion in the history as vital and crucial and not just peripheral.

Moore:

That's great because young adults don't always, I would even say, rarely see themselves included in the historical narrative of African Methodism. Too often they are demonized as being too carnal, too cultural, and difficult to teach. It seems, in my observation, that people see the negative of their generation and not the positive. What are your thoughts on that?

Bishop Ingram:

Who was it? Marvin Sapp who said, "He saw the best in me, when everyone else around could only see the worst in me?"

Moore:

The worst! Yeah. That was Marvin Sapp.

Bishop Ingram:

I think at that point, you got to look at the best and not the worst, because as a member of the senior generation, we see the best and worst of ourselves in those who come behind us. The goal is to ensure that the best not only outweighs the worst, but that the worst is mitigated by the sharing of our wisdom.

Moore:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Finally, you said something key about the meetings we have. We have a legislative convo coming up, and this has been one of my personal frustrations in that we have a great meeting model, but we don't always utilize it in the best way. As a Bishop you were very progressive in not using your annual conference time simply to read through pastoral reports, but to deal with critical issues of training, development, and empowerment. I mean, we spend, on average, two and a half days, just going through pastoral reports of things that could be emailed out, and in some cases should be because they do not paint a very good portrait of some of our churches. Instead, we can spend that time utilizing the expertise in the district and across the church to present studies dealing with the shifting demographics of our communities, the social issues of our members and the ever-changing spiritual and theological landscape that exists in this age of social media. We need collective minds around these issues and how we deal with them. How do we adjust our focus to do, as you spoke of earlier, to be intentional regarding things we can do once we leave the meeting?

Bishop Ingram:

Well, let me tell you now, again, I said you got to integrate both. Methodism is about reporting. Historically, that's what people did, they came and gave reports, right? You can spend all your time listening to the same old, same old, right? My issue is, if it's that important, write some of the information down, and if the pastor wants to share it and give it to people, we can find a way to accomplish that. I used to do annual reports. And I invested money to make nice reports. I also know that at a denominational meeting, you've got a captive audience. If you want to inspire

people, then you got to bring some other experts and other people in. So, you can go back with some new mechanics to help your church accomplish its mission. These things you can share with the people because you do know that nine tenths of the people in chairs are not coming to your major meetings.

Moore:

Absolutely. You only have a few. Absolutely.

Bishop Ingram:

We also want to make sure that people have something to take back with. This makes the meeting more than a fellowshipping opportunity, but an empowering opportunity.

Moore:

Last question. How important is it for the church to have partnerships; to be working with civic organizations, government entities and grass roots organizations? I know in your pastoral ministry, that was a model, we had many community partners at Oak Grove in Detroit. I ask this because many young adults are associated and affiliated with these types of organizations.

Bishop Ingram:

Yes, we were again, very intentional in that aspect. That also speaks about the kind of mission we had in that we had many endeavors that required outside participation in terms of building partnerships. Those years that I was there at Oak Grove, in the first 10 years, we gave over $300,000 in educational scholarships, 1.5 million in support, mission, work and outreach. We also did a major ministry outreach to women who were facing challenges as you may remember. This also was done as an aspect of an inclusionary vision.

Moore:

Yes, I recall this very well, Bishop.

Bishop Ingram:

That's, again, what I'm talking about in terms of community. Now, if no one else knows that you exist, how can you excel? You can't be so insulated, that it's all about me and my mine without reaching out because the church must exist outside of those four walls. Yeah, not just inside. It was Elton Trueblood who took the company of the committed, which I kind of paraphrase if you look at many of our churches, they are the fellowship of the frustrated. If you have a church committed to those whom they share a community with, they will do ministry to and for them, and that's when you attract people. It is when the sermon is not just heard inside, but it is seen outside, that a difference is made. We did a lot of things with men who are recovering from drugs and alcohol. This is the mission mindedness you spoke of earlier that many young adults

are engaged in and concerned about now. Once you engage people outside, you never know what a blessing they may be inside. That's how we came up with a ministry called the Masters Men. Yeah, they had all kinds of talent. Yeah, I mean, they were plumbers and electricians. No. Need for a certain thing. And we didn't have to pay them because this became their ministry as well.

Moore:

I see young adults as being able to make similar contributions if given a chance, or moreover, if given an invitation. What are your thoughts?

Bishop Ingram:

I think that what you're speaking of is bringing in a composite of all this together and looking to the young adults to provide their insight to the ministry we have, so that it can become the ministries we want and moreover need. We are at a critical time right now and if the church is going to be the church, growing, and thriving, it is imperative that we incorporate before we become almost extinct. We better do something. Do something in a hurry. I heard; I think it was Tim O'Brien say the other day that the fastest growing religious sect is now Muslims. They are witnessing with their message, and they are bringing in people. What do we do? I agree we must be inclusive of all and bring our brilliant and bright young adults to critical decision making and vision casting places in our church, for our present and most definitely for our future.

Moore:

Amen. Well, I thank you for your time, Bishop. This has been rich, and you gave me a lot here and I appreciate it. Hopefully, we'll see some of these things come to fruition as we keep trying to pull it together. I believe we will make the necessary steps to be more inclusive, and I remain hopeful.

Chapter 4: METHODS

This chapter will begin by delineating the AME Church's previous efforts to address inclusion issues. From there, the chapter will discuss the methods employed for this project. More specifically, a listing of the survey and interview questions from those interviewed individually and those polled during a focus group will be presented. This will be followed by a description of all the individuals interviewed in a one-on-one Zoom setting. In addition, there will be a description of the composition of the focus group that was surveyed for this project. Next, there will be a description of the data collection, which shall include the criteria for the persons selected to participate in this project and the settings in which they were engaged. Finally, the methodology for analysis shall be outlined.

AME's Previous Efforts

This is not the first time the AME church has recognized the need to address the issue of inclusion. For example, in September 2002, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) embarked on a reform journey to reorganize and restructure the AME Church of the 21st century. This process, called Strategic Church Planning, was a two-year effort to develop a vibrant, growing denomination that accomplishes the Great Commission. The next phase, the Implementation Phase, is expected to span at least two additional quadrennials (eight-plus years). Success Results Consulting, Inc. (SRC), an organization development firm located in

Germantown, Maryland, facilitated this process using a research-based, five-phase strategic planning process. The 90-member Strategic Planning Core Team (SPCT) consisted of a "diagonal slice" (microcosm) of the AMEC membership and included Bishops, General Officers, Presiding Elders, Elders, Pastors, laypersons, and Youth.

The SPCT conducted two surveys of the Church membership. The first survey, from which 10,500 responses were collected, was intended to allow the populace to voice their honest opinions of the existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in AMEC. The second survey of the Church's membership, more in-depth demographically and psycho-graphically, produced 15,058 responses.[34] Identified in this strategic plan were thirteen elements under the subheading of "AMEC's Wake Up Calls," which are defined as follows: Wake up calls are circumstances, events, and trends in the environment that indicate that something has changed or is changing.[35]

Based upon the strategic plan and the seeming lack of follow-up with any significant change in the area of young adult inclusion and retention, these questions were posed to this connectional group of individuals in hopes of obtaining a cross-geographical perspective on the correlation between the sentiment discovered in the study conducted in 2002, and those presently incorporated in RAYAC, given that many of them were toddlers at that time. From the data collected in 2002, the Strategic Plan Core Team (SPCT) identified 13 issues as the most pressing wake-up calls for the AMEC, which were as follows:

[34] "Executive Summary of the Strategic Plan." AME-Church.Com. African Methodist Episcopal Church, https://www.ame-church.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/strategic-plan-executive-summary-2.pdf. September 9, 2002, 1.

[35] "Ibid., 2.

1. Declining membership

2. Legal problems

3. Exiting youth & young adults

4. Exit of ministers

5. Absence of men in membership

6. Loss of institutions

7. Not enough programs for senior citizens

8. “What used to be first has now become last” (Church Priorities)

9. Shortage of finance/resources

10.The lack of pride

11 Impact of world events on our lives

12. Failure to follow the AMEC Discipline and order of the Church

13.Anti-denominational sentiment

In addition to this, as a part of the Strategic Plan, the SWOT analysis denoted the weaknesses as:

- Lack of Clergy Management, Training, & Skills
- Lack of Finance & Economic Development
- Polity
- Lack of Evangelistic Fervor
- Lack of Communications

- Lack of Youth & Young Adult Inclusion
- Lack of Church Expansion/Combination

Finally, in the category of threats, the following were listed:

- Lack of Finance/Accountability
- Leadership-Education/Training & Moral Issues
- Lack of Youth & Young Adult Retention & Inclusion
- Loss of Members
- Tradition/Ritual/Loss of History
- Too Many Small Churches
- Legal Issues

The Current Study's Interview Questions

The following questions were used in the five interviews of specific individuals within the RAYAC:

1. What are your thoughts regarding young adult inclusion in the legislative structure of the AME Church?
2. How has the departure of many young adults impacted your faith in the AME Church?
3. What is the biggest challenge to attracting and maintaining young adults?
4. Has your voice been suppressed on critical issues in your church? If so, how?
5. Do you believe your church has maximized your gifts or talents?
6. How is your relationship with the older members of your church?

7. Do you believe that positions of authority have been withheld from you because of your age?
8. What would improve relationships between young adults and seniors?
9. Has the move to greater use of technology increased the dependency upon young adults?
10. What ministry issues are important to you that are seemingly insignificant to those in the older generation?
11. Do you feel that you have adequate legislative representation of your generation in critical decisions regarding the direction of your church?
12. Does RAYAC being established in 1996 speak more to progress or to antiquated thinking because it took so long to recognize this age group officially?
13. Does your age serve as an asset or a liability in your faith experience? Explain.
14. What do you value in the older generation and what do you wish they valued in your generation?
15. What do you see for the future of the AME Church?
16. Do you see yourself remaining in the AME Church in the next 20 years?
17. How can the church better service your personal spiritual needs?
18. Name one thing you love about the AME Church.
19. Name one thing you dislike about the AME Church.
20. What is your hope for the future of our denomination and how would you like to contribute to it legislatively?
21. How would you empower and grow the influence of RAYAC?
22. Do you think that the General Conference should underwrite some of the costs for youth and young adult attendance?

23. In what ways can/should youth and young adults have greater participation at the local church level?

24. We have seen younger people champion causes such as gun violence and voter suppression. What other issues are justice issues are important to you and how should the church address them?

25. How can the church support sexual diversity, or how might we positively engage the LGBTQ+ community?

On June 19, 2023, the AME Church's General Board and Council of Bishops met in New Orleans, Louisiana for its semi-annual gathering. At 3 p.m., the connectional RAYAC held a meeting for activity planning and legislative interest in the upcoming 2024 General Conference. Dr. Garland Pierce, the Connectional Director of Christian Education, which is the reporting body for RAYAC, allowed me to conduct a focus group with the 12 people in attendance. The following questions were asked:

- Do you have any expectation of inclusion around the critical issues of social justice engagement, gender equality, and declining church membership?
- Is it disheartening to you that there has been no legislation or plans for the development of a tool to enhance engagement with your age group?
- Do you find it frustrating that the meetings for RAYAC, apart from this meeting, often take place at the end of the day's agenda, and are always off-site?
- What do you say to your contemporaries who have left the AME Church out of frustration with the lack of inclusion and the perceived unwillingness to change?

- What is your hope for this meeting regarding RAYAC and how do you feel this organization can play a vital part in the present and future of the AME Church?

The aim of each question is to ascertain the perspective of the young adults regarding their personal experiences, level of involvement, and overall outlook on the AME Church, both locally and connectionally. This project seeks to provide a unique tool in the analysis of a previously identified problem that has been left without any clear solution to remedy the problem of young adult marginalization.

From shortly after the dawn of the 21st century, it has been abundantly clear that the lack of young adults involved in the AME Church is of significant concern, not just for the future existence but the present relevance. Much of what has been ascertained in the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, mirrors the concerns of the executive summary of the strategic plan developed over 20 years ago. However, unlike the results of the development of the strategic plan, this project hopes to not only point out the consistent nature of the ongoing issue of young adult exclusion in local congregations but also provide remedies to address the structural exclusion of young adults and provide a tool to encourage a cultural shift resulting in the attraction, retention and inclusion of young adults in significant leadership positions and in vision casting constructs within the AME Church.

Description of Interview Subjects

There were five people interviewed who were either current or former members of the Greater Bethel AME Church where I currently serve. They were:

- **Jazzmine Boyer** is a 24-year-old single mother of a four-year-old daughter, who works as an assistant in a veterinarian's office. She also owns her own business as a vegan culinary caterer. The daughter of one of the ministers who currently serves on the staff at the Greater Bethel AME Church, Jazzmine has basically grown up in the church. She currently serves as the president of the local RAYAC at Greater Bethel. Jazzmine left the Greater Bethel AME Church at age 21 because of comments made to her about her infant child crying during the worship service, and because of the treatment that her invited guests received during a Sunday morning service regarding their attire. Jazzmine returned in December 2022 and has been a consistent contributor to the vision and mission of the church.

- **Sharonda Alexander** is a 32-year-old mother of two daughters, one a freshman in high school and the other a preschooler. She currently works part-time at a medicinal marijuana dispensary but was recently hired as an administrative assistant at a local university. Sharonda and her mother are transplants to the Nashville area, having relocated from Detroit, Michigan, a little over twelve years ago. She is a fifth-generation member of the AME Church and currently sings on the Praise Team of Greater Bethel AME Church. Her ministry desire is to start a radio show centered on young adult issues of family, career, and faith during a politically polarized culture.

- **Glendavion Jamal Teasley** is the 26-year-old Pastor of Mt. Zion AME Church in Centerville, TN. He was the former youth minister of the Greater Bethel AME Church in

Nashville. Glendavion currently works part-time at a local university and is pursuing his bachelor's degree. He is single with no children and has been in ministry since 1994. He began his ministerial journey in the Baptist denomination, where he received his ministerial ordination in 2013. However, he later changed his affiliation to the AME Church, where he was licensed to preach in 2021 and ordained last year. Rev. Teasley is the president of RAYAC for the Tennessee Annual Conference of the AME Church in the 13th Episcopal district of the denomination, comprising the state of Tennessee and the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a position he was appointed to in October 2023.

- **LaQuandrea Sweat** is a 21-year-old college student, who recently accepted her call to licensed and ordained ministry. She is a full-time college student who also just recently completed her term as the 13th Episcopal district YPD president. LaQuandrea is the only child of a single mother who is currently pastoring an AME Church in the Nashville, Tennessee area. She is a lifelong member of the AME Church and served on the connectional level of the church, representing her episcopal district on both the local and connectional levels. LaQuandrea is now transitioning from her participation in the church as a member of the Young People's and Children Division (YPD) of the church, which encompasses various age group components ranging in age from 2 to 26. It is in the overlap of the YPD and RAYAC

- **Dr. BiShaun Battle** is a 40-year-old educator, who has taught at both college and elementary school levels. He is single and currently serves the Greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville as the Assistant Director of Music and the Director of Media. He is

also a member of the Board of Trustees. Dr. Battle has had an ecumenical experience growing up in the church. He has been a part of the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), and a member of the Catholic, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions. He comes from a family of thirteen children, and he is the ninth out of thirteen. Dr. Battle's family is very religious and one of his siblings is a well renowned hip-hop artist. Dr. Battle has served the church on both the local and connectional levels, as the 13th Episcopal district president of RAYAC and as a connectional officer of RAYAC for the past four years.

The twelve individuals who met at the Bishop's Council and General Board Meeting were all members of RAYAC, representing various episcopal districts of the AME Church. The districts represented in this gathering and the geographical areas they represent were as follows:

- Episcopal District 1 - Bermuda, Delaware, New England, New Jersey, New York, Western New York, and Philadelphia
- Episcopal District 2 - Baltimore, Washington, Virginia, North Carolina, and Western North Carolina (2 representatives)
- Episcopal District 4 - Indiana, Chicago, Illinois, Michigan, Canada, and India
- Episcopal District 5 - Arizona, California, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Utah, (2 representatives)
- Episcopal District 7 - South Carolina (2 representatives)
- Episcopal District 9 - Alabama
- Episcopal District 11 - Florida (2 representatives)
- Episcopal District 12 - Arkansas and Oklahoma

All the people engaged are stakeholders in the AME Church from the perspective of their involvement in RAYAC. They possess a shared interest in seeing young adults garner a greater level of leadership positions, voting power, and ministry inclusion. The five individuals chosen for the one-on-one interviews were selected based on the following criteria:

- Must be an active member of the church, serving in some capacity as well as being in good and regular standing as outlined in the Book of Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church undersection entitled Membership, subsection E, page 91, in the 2021 edition.
- Must possess and demonstrate, through service to the congregation and greater community alike, a willingness to further the mission and vision of the church
- Must have a membership in the church for a minimum of two years
- Must be in the age range of 21-39, and belong to the RAYAC

Those engaged in the focus group were attendees at the Bishop's Council and General Board meeting who were invited to attend the RAYAC session of the meeting. They attended a gathering to discuss the upcoming legislative process of the General Conference and their desired role in that meeting. While RAYAC is under the banner of Christian Education, the Connectional Director has oversight of RAYAC and allotted a segment of the agenda to be dedicated to this project. At this meeting, there was representation from eight of the thirteen Episcopal districts situated in the United States.

The individual interviews all took place via Zoom, including the interview with the activist, which is included in the previous chapter. The Zoom platform provided an opportunity to engage with the persons directly in an environment that was comfortable for both the subject and the interviewer. The ability to be able to transcribe the dialogue was invaluable in recalling

statements made and answers to the questions, which aided tremendously in the compiling of the data for processing information for the development of the legislative tools as well as the creation of a tool for local churches to address both the culture and structures of the local congregation. The focus group discussion took place in a meeting room where the subjects were gathered to fulfill their denominational obligation and address critical issues concerning their organization, RAYAC. The setting provided a private environment via a closed-door gathering that only members of RAYAC were allowed to attend. It was the privacy that encouraged the transparency in which they not only answered the questions that were asked but provided tremendous and insightful follow-up discourse to the specific subject matter raised by the question. Again, I am indebted to Dr. Garland Pierce for including my project work as a component of the agenda for RAYAC and the connectional president of RAYAC, Mr. Jeremy D. Satterwhite. By allowing me to moderate this focus group, I received a first-hand introduction to the geographical perspectives of the AME Church from young adults who shared similar experiences in the lack of inclusion while also attempting to keep others from their age group from defecting to other denominations or from church altogether. It was under the guise of this unspoken confidentiality that very heartfelt and honest responses were provided.

After receiving all the information from the transcribed conversations in both the individual interviews and the group discussion, that answers were compiled and analyzed according to the consistency and similarity of the responses provided. What was clear to me and will be highlighted in the next chapter were the words of Joshua Mitchell, when he stated, “One of the uncomfortable truths that the Black church must wrestle with is that it is no longer the central hub for the Black community—-at least not for Black Millennials. Moreover, the church must also see that it is not even the primary place where theological conversations are being held

among Millennials."[36] The qualitative research conducted for this project provided a significant level of insight and productive engagement, which will hopefully bear fruit beyond this project in the continuing goal of ecclesiastical inclusion.

[36] Mitchell, *Black Millennial*s, 142.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS

This chapter will begin with a detailed report of the respondents' answers and a subsequent follow-up dialogue from both individual interviews and the focus group discussion. This will include direct quotes that substantiate the majority opinions of those interviewed and engaged in the project. Next, a prescription document will be inserted, proposing a five-themed strategic response to the issue of young adult exclusion and exodus from the AME Church. This section will also provide a sample of a proposed legislation addressing this concern of young adult exclusion. Next, the chapter will paint a picture of the outlook for the future if the proposed prescriptions are implemented and if they are not. The chapter will then offer some examples of failed attempts to address this disorder thus far, and the results that have stemmed from this failure. Finally, this chapter will conclude with proposals on how to improve the culture of the climate of the AME Church for the inclusion of young adults in the future.

What the Respondents Said and Meta-Analysis

1. What are your thoughts regarding young adult inclusion in the legislative structure of the AME Church?

Meta-Analysis:

Respondents were unanimous in their expression that there is not enough inclusion of young adults in the legislative agenda of the AME Church on either the local or connectional level. There was a collective sentiment that the critical legal issues important to this age group are not taken seriously enough to be included in the overall legislative outlook of the church.

Rev. Glendavion Jamal Teasley is the 26-year-old Pastor of Mt. Zion AME Church in Centerville, TN. He was the former youth minister of the Greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville. He is currently employed part-time at a local university and pursuing his bachelor's degree. He is single with no children and has been in ministry since 1994. He began his ministerial journey in the Baptist denomination, and was ordained last year in the AME Church. Rev. Teasley is also the president of RAYAC for the Tennessee Annual Conference of the AME Church in the 13th Episcopal district of the denomination, a position he was appointed to in October of 2023.

Rev. Teasley states, "I think that a lot of our ideas are being brought to the table, but when they are brought to the table, they're left at the table. I feel that we are only heard when it benefits the older generation. There seems to be a notion as to where they say, 'We will listen to you to bring in more young people so that we can have the numbers,' but once you all get in, you have no voice."

2. How has the departure of many young adults impacted your faith in the AME Church?

Meta-Analysis:

Only 20% acknowledged an impact upon their faith as a direct impact of young adults leaving the church. 80% indicated that while being disappointed by the departure of their contemporaries from the denomination left them a bit disheartened, it did not impact their faith in the institution of the AME Church. They felt that the issues of departure needed to be explored and addressed, but they still see good in the denomination.

Dr. BiShaun Battle is a 40-year-old educator, who has taught at both college and elementary school levels. He is single, and currently serves the Greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville as the Assistant Director of Music, the Director of Media and he is also a member of the Board of Trustees. Dr. Battle has had an ecumenical experience growing up in the church. He has been a part of the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), as well as a member of the Catholic, Baptist, and Pentecostal traditions.

BiShaun states: “At one point, it did. It did. Real quick, I came in with a generation who were not AME. So, when I fully understood AME Church and its polity, and all its laws and rules, I fully understood that it's not just about who's preaching or who's the pastor; it's about the community in which the church is supposed to be drawn to. So, at that point, I realized it's not about who's up there preaching, it's about what we are doing as a church, and as a faith community, what are we doing for our people.”

3. What is the biggest challenge to attracting and maintaining young adults?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents felt that the feelings of judgment and disenfranchisement were the chief barriers to attracting and maintaining young adults. A lack of visibility in the leadership and in addressing issues were also noted.

Jazzmine Boyer is a 24-year-old single mother of a four-year-old daughter who works in a veterinarian's office as an assistant and owns her own business as a vegan culinary caterer. Jazzmine is the daughter of one of the ministers who currently serves on the staff at the Greater Bethel AME Church, and has basically grown up in the church. Jazzmine currently serves as the president of the local RAYAC at Greater Bethel. Jazzmine left the Greater Bethel AME Church at age 21 because of comments made to her about her crying infant and the treatment of her invited guests to a Sunday morning service. Jazzmine returned in December 2022 and has been a consistent contributor to the vision and mission of the church.

Boyer states: "The biggest challenge that is keeping young adults from the church is a lack of inclusion, but also not listening to them when they have things that they want to share or advice that they want to include in different areas in the AME Church."

4. Has your voice been suppressed on critical issues in your church? If so, how?

Meta-Analysis:

Respondents unanimously agreed that their voices had been suppressed on critical issues for various reasons—100% consistency regarding a sense of limited engagement and control. An

overall consistency was expressed concerning the church's ignorance or unwillingness to address the issues of our time, and those of this generation.

LaQuandrea Sweat is a 21-year-old full-time college student who recently completed her term as the 13th Episcopal district YPD president. She is a lifelong member of the AME Church and served on the connectional level of the church, representing her district on both the local and connectional levels. She is now transitioning from her participation in the church as a member of the Young People's and Children Division (YPD) of the church, which encompasses various age group components ranging in age from 2 to 26. LaQuandrea states, "When you say church, do you mean local or connectional church? I will, I'll do both locally. I will say I didn't feel suppressed until now. At my mom's previous pastoral charge from this, before she got moved to this annual conference, I felt like they would give me enough freedom to where it made them look good. But if I reached too far, then that's when they were like, 'Oh, no, you're doing too much.' My mom said, "People always want to talk about change, but never want it when it's at their doorstep."

5. Do you believe your church has maximized your gifts or talents?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents felt a definite underutilization of their gifts within the local and connectional church. This underutilization was noted as intentional and unintentional but was present nevertheless. The respondents expressed an incredible frustration with the church regarding being relegated to reduced roles within the church that did not necessarily highlight the gifts and talents possessed by the younger generation. This sentiment was expressed most

concisely by Sharonda Alexander, a 32-year-old mother of two daughters, one a freshman in high school and the other a preschooler. Sharonda was just recently hired as an administrative assistant at a local university. Sharonda is a fifth-generation member of the AME Church, specifically the Greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville.

Sharonda Alexander shared: “No. Of that, I feel suppressed. Because I always ask for things and always say I want to do this, or I want to do that. It's like, okay, and then I’m shut down. Even recently, I asked for a certain idea to be implemented, only to be told by the older generation, “Oh, she's not ready.” However, what really upset me was I wasn't even told directly. I overheard the conversation of somebody who repeated my question, and I overheard the answer.”

6. How is your relationship with the older members of your church?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents indicated that despite feeling excluded from leadership positions and critical conversations regarding the vision for the church, the relationships with the older generation were pretty good. There was a universally expressed appreciation for the sacrifices and generational longevity of the older generation.

Sharonda Alexander states, “I have a pretty good relationship with the older generation. Also, I feel like that's because my family has been in that church for five generations. I think because we have such a long history with the church, I’m more accepted than others of my age group might be at times. But I think we all have a good relationship with the older members.”

7. Do you believe that positions of authority have been withheld from you because of your age?

Meta-Analysis:

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that age was certainly a factor in the persons being elected and selected for leadership on all levels of the church. The respondents believed that because they were younger, many felt as though they had not been in the church long enough or that they did not have the expertise to function at the level that the church was used to without trying to implement change that may not be wanted or warranted.

BiShaun Battle, an educator who has taught at various levels, from elementary education to college, and served in various capacities of the church, giving him a greater perspective than most in his age group would have, stated: "Yes. I'm going to try to say this nicely. They say they know what needs to be done when it comes to young people per se. They put in laws and legislation, but they only do the bare minimum. Because again, I believe that the older Black generation has worked so hard for their leadership and culture that they truly believe that they've been through so much and the only leadership they can get is within the church. It's hard for them to give it up."

8. What would it take to improve relationships between young adults and seniors?

Meta-Analysis:

Unanimously, respondents believed that improved relationships between the younglts and the other generation calls for more open communication between the two generations. Respondents

indicated that there needs to be more intention, honest communications thatch could dispel myths and stereotypes, allowing both sides to find the common ground needed.

Rev. Glendavion Jamal Teasley, who currently pastors two AME Churches while working full time and is also a student currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in social sciences, states, "Understanding one another and allowing the space and freedom to be able to voice a concern, and it not come off so defensive or offensive. But even more so, opening our ears to actively listen and hear what others are saying."

9. Has the move to greater use of technology increased the dependency upon young adults?

Meta-Analysis:

The respondents indicated that the implementation of technology has created a greater need for young adults in the church. As many of the older members are attempting to navigate the ever-changing world of technology to view worship services online or attend virtual meetings, the use of technology has created a dependency upon the younger generation that was not present before the COVID-19 shutdown of 2020, but that dependency seems to be limited to that area.

BiShaun Battle, who works as the media director for the Greater Bethel AME Church and served on the episcopal district media committee, states, "We've become more useful to the older folks regarding technology, which I know the older folks do have issues with nowadays. But at the end of the day, they still put us in the back. So, the only thing that they see that we're useful for at this moment is technology-related issues."

10. What ministry issues are important to you that are seemingly not important to those in the older generation?

Meta-Analysis:

Respondents indicated overwhelmingly that issues of mentoring are germane to them and are seemingly going unaddressed. Respondents feel as though many older members do not wish to train their replacements, so mentoring does not take place out of fear of being replaced, or worse, forgotten.

Jazzmine Boyer, who also just recently returned to the church after leaving it for a four-year period stated, “I have mentorship in my mind and heart right now. You don't see a lot of that in the AME churches--the mentoring of the youth. So, I feel like that would probably be the issue that a lot of the older folks don't want to have that responsibility. They don’t nurture and train so that there can be a continuity in the life of the church. It could be as simple as checking up on someone and making sure that the youths are okay.”

11. Do you feel that you have adequate representation of your generation in critical decisions regarding the direction of your church?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents do not believe that there is adequate representation regarding the direction of the church, which appears to be a sense of great frustration. Respondents expressed a consistent sense of irrelevancy with having input on the direction of the church. The respondents said critical decisions are left in the hands of a few older saints who do not listen to their ideas.

Sharonda Alexander says, “No, I don't think we have representation. Not from my age group. I mean, you got a couple in there, I guess to make it look good. It seems like that from the outside looking in, that's what it was or at least what it seemed like, but not a true representation. There are not a lot of things that are enticing us to want to attend things like annual conferences and planning meetings. We don’t seem to be a part of the agenda.”

12. Does RAYAC being established in 1996 speak more to progress or to antiquated thinking because it took so long to officially recognize this age group?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, respondents were diverse in their collective responses. While some saw it as a sign of unwillingness to include young adults in critical roles, others saw it as a sign of progress. All respondents agreed that it should have happened much sooner, but there was a difference regarding the viewpoint and perspective on interpreting the establishment of RAYAC at that time.

BiShaune Battle, who serves the church on various levels, states, “I’ll have to answer that in two parts. First, in the overseas districts, RAYAC is very strong. You have over one thousand persons in the overseas districts of 14-20 that belong to the RAYAC. The problem exists in the U.S., where we seem to have a non-inclusive culture.”

13. Does your age serve as an asset or a liability in your faith experience? Explain.

Meta-Analysis:

All respondents indicated that their age was an asset for various reasons. Some believed their age helped them stay relevant on all cultural and social issues. Others believed their age was an asset because it signified that they would become the church's leadership by attrition, if for no other reason.

LaQuandrea Sweat, who served the church as YPD president and has a mother who pastors an AME Church, says, “It is most definitely an asset. The church is changing, you know, we're going into an age where the knowledge and exposure that we have will be the important tools to keep moving the church forward. We are about to elect six new Bishops, and they will have had the experience of pastoring through a pandemic and the important role of technology and the impact of social issues. This is critical. This is my generation.”

14. What do you value in the older generation and what do you wish they valued in your generation?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents indicated that they valued the traditions that the older members continue, and their affinity for them. There was a valuing of the stories of the sacrifices and genuine faith. However, they also expressed a desire for the older generation to appreciate their faith expressions and their contributions to the church.

Rev. Teasley, who pastors two congregations, one of which the median age is over 75, states, “I value their wisdom. I value their experiences, the tradition, and their persistence, because no matter what, you can't really get tradition out of them. It helps my generation to embrace it, to learn more about it, because the only history some of us get is in church, church history, church hymns, you know, the way we preach and the way we learn certain things. Then for our generation, I wish they would embrace how we express in worship, how we express in our meditative moments, how we express what and who God is to us. That God is not just sitting on a throne, but he's here in our everyday world.”

15. What do you see for the future of the AME Church?

Meta-Analysis:

Collectively, the respondents responded with hope for the church built upon an inclusionary approach which incorporates people within the membership context of the church and those without. The respondents overwhelmingly expressed the sentiment of the church being a solid institution that sometimes could exhibit some weaknesses, but it was still God’s faithful community.

Sharonda Alexander, a single mother of two children, who sings in the choir at Greater Bethel AME Church says, “I see good things. Bishop David Daniels said it best, that ‘The AME Church is a divine institution with human situations.’ I think that the divine part will always be greater than the human part.”

16. Do you see yourself remaining in the AME Church in the next 20 years?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, respondents indicated an expectation of being in the AME Church 20 years from now. While there was some hesitancy with making a commitment to be in the church, there was an expressed optimism that the church could become the institution in which they would live out their faith expression.

BiShaune Battle states, "Yes. I believe there is great potential. I come from a long line of diverse denominations, but I believe that the AME Church has a great balance of what can be done also appearing to the laws and rules that we have, but also the freedom that we can have for religious expression."

17. How can the church better service your personal spiritual needs?

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, the respondents indicated that there was a need for greater tools to assist with spiritual growth. They all expressed an appreciation for the Sunday morning worship experience, but also expressed a need for more practical tools to deal with their everyday lives.

Jazzmine Boyer, a single mother who had left church and now has returned, says, "Having more insight and more resources to build my spirituality as I deal with life as a single mother, an entrepreneur, and an employee. I think just being able to see things spiritually would help me, so if we had the resources or some way of dealing with these things, that would help me."

18. Name one thing you love about the AME Church.

Meta-Analysis:

Overwhelmingly, the respondents indicated that the relationships that they have formed in the church is one thing they love about the church and tout it as its most crucial feature. Respondents expressed a sense of community that is not easily found outside of the church.

LaQuandrea Sweat states, “The relationships, you know, the networking of it all. I wouldn't have the network that I have in my life without the AME Church. So, on my father's side of the family, we're not the closest. I'm pretty much the black sheep on that side. When I came into the church, there were so many people clapping and embracing me because I'm a social butterfly and it was because of this church that I was able to explore new friendships across the country and abroad.”

19. Name one thing you dislike about the AME Church.

Meta-Analysis:

Overall, respondents indicated that the inconsistency of the standards and legislative restrictions is something they vehemently dislike. The collective sentiment seemed to rest upon a disdain for the politics of the church, which causes it to be unfair and unequal at times in how it holds persons accountable.

Rev. Teasley states, “Inconsistency! We have laws and regulations that seem to apply to some and not to others. They seem to apply to certain situations and not others. There is a lack of

consistency and a lack of accountability from the highest levels of the church right down to the local level."

20. What Is your hope for the future of our denomination and how would you like to contribute to it legislatively?

Meta-Analysis:

Overwhelmingly, the respondents expressed hope that the church's future would be more inclusive of young adults. Responses indicated that the hope would also be inclusive of young adults in the legislative process, not just to satisfy a legislative mandate for inclusion but to be viewed as viable contributors to the overall vision and mission of the church.

Jazzmine Boyer says, "That is a good question. My hope for the future of the AME Church is that I want young adults to be more visible in the mission of the church. We are somewhat visible I guess. But I would like to see us be even more out there in the forefront on some things and for people to know that we are here and we're here to help all persons. As far as my contribution, I just want to be that legislative advocate for anybody who needs me. No matter where I am or where we go in the AME Church. I just want to be there as a representative of Christ, even in the legislation."

21. How would you empower and grow the influence of RAYAC?

Meta-Analysiss:

The respondents indicated that the empowerment and influence of RAYAC must come from a more significant presence and inclusion at the connectional level meetings, where the overall business of the global church is conducted. By not being in the places and spaces where important decisions are made on critical issues, there is an absence that currently prevents the growth and influence from being what they could possibly be.

LaQuandrea Sweat stated, “I would empower my age group by encouraging attendance at connectional meetings and training. When you look at who is attending those meetings, where very important issues are addressed, we are always absent. I know many of us don’t see the point in attending these meetings, but our absence is often used against us. If we are there, our influence and empowerment will grow automatically to the point that we cannot be ignored as we have been in times past.”

22. Do you think that the General Conference should underwrite some of the costs for youth and young adult attendance?

Meta-Analysis:

The respondents overwhelmingly suggest and believe that the General Conference should underwrite the costs of some young adults' attendance. Since the absence of young adults has been a documented concern for over 20 years, the church should be willing to invest in this missing or leaving generation.

BiShaun Battle states, “You cannot say that something or someone is important to you and you’re not willing to make an investment in it. This is the most important meeting in the AME Church, and we should be able to finance some young adults from each district to attend. The work of the church often goes incomplete at the General Conference, but a lot of money has been exchanged with the various vendors, the local stores of whatever city we happen to be in, the hotels, restaurants, etc.… So, with all the revenue being generated, it only makes sense that an investment in the age group that we complain about being missing should be made. I’m not sure how that could be executed, but right now it’s not even a discussion.”

23. How can the church support sexual diversity or how might we positively engage the LGBTQ+ community?

Meta-Analysis:

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed a need for open and honest discussion regarding how to support the LGBTQ+ community. But they also communicated a frustration with the church’s unwillingness to do so. There was a collective sentiment that the church must become more open to dealing with complex topics because these topics affect how people are treated by the church when the church should love all persons.

Rev. Teasley put it this way, “We first must be comfortable with the conversation regarding sexual preference and orientation because we treat it like such a taboo topic. The interesting thing is that we have members of the LGBTQ+ community in our families and in our churches, but for some reason, we don’t want to have an earnest conversation about it. I think we

need to get our house in order before we can engage on this topic. I'm not sure what that looks like, but we must make some attempts to reach out and have some genuine conversations."

Prescription Documents

These documents noted as prescriptions include both a proposed legislative remedy to make sure that inclusion of the members of RAYAC increases to enhance representation in the voting delegation of the General Conference and a local tool for churches to utilize that can aid in shifting the culture of the AME Church towards inclusion of young adults and the issues that are critical to this age group in an increased capacity. The first document is the proposed legislation, which reads as follows:

2024 General Conference Proposed Legislation Form[37]

General Conference legislation submission begins April 1st, 2023, and will continue until 11:59 pm Central Daylight Time (CDT) on May 21st, 2024.

- Title*

  General Conference Composition

- First and Last Name*

  Rev. Byron C. Moore

[37] 2024 Proposed General Conference Legislation Form." Ame-church.Com. African Methodist Episcopal Church, September 12, 2023. https://www.ame-church.com/general-conference-proposed-legislation-form/.

- Email*

  pastorbcm0902@gmail.com

- Page Reference in Current AME Discipline*

  Page 370, Part XIV Section I A

- Intent*

  To bring equitable representation to the General Conference Delegation for an identified marginalized group in the Strategic Plan of 2002

- Rationale*

  To adjust the disparity that currently exists relative to RAYAC representation in the General Conference Composition.

- Current Text[38]

  The composition of the General Conference shall be the bishops; the general officers elected by the General Conference; the General Secretary/CIO of the General Conference; the presidents of the universities and colleges; the deans of seminaries that have been in operation continuously for one (1) or more years prior to the General Conference; the president and treasurer of the Women's Missionary Society; the editor of the Women's Missionary Magazine; the director of the Young People's and Children's Division; the Connectional presidents of Women In Ministry (WIM), Richard Allen Young Adult Council (RAYAC),

[38] African Methodist Episcopal Church. *Doctrine and Discipline*, 370.

Young People's and Children's Division (YPD) and Lay Organization; Episcopal District Lay Presidents; the president of the Connectional Council; the Executive Director and Medical Director of the Health Commission; active-duty military and veterans administration chaplains who have been ordained for at least four (4) years preceding the General conference and those who are retired with a minimum of twenty (20) years of service the Armed Forces of the United States; former World War II Chaplains who are in good and regular standing their annual conferences; the administrators of all Connectional institutions (i.e., Douglas Hospital); the President of the Connectional Presiding Elders Council, and elected clergy and lay delegates from each annual conference.

- Amended Text* (Proposal)

  The composition of the General Conference shall be the bishops; the general officers elected by the General Conference; the General Secretary/CIO of the General Conference; the presidents of the universities and colleges; the deans of seminaries that have been in operation continuously for one (1) or more years prior to the General Conference; the president and treasurer of the Women's Missionary Society; the editor of the Women's Missionary Magazine; the director of the Young People's and Children's Division; the Connectional presidents of Women In Ministry (WIM), Richard Allen Young Adult Council (RAYAC), the episcopal district presidents of RAYAC; and one at large seat; Young People's and Children's Division (YPD) and Lay Organization; Episcopal District Lay Presidents; the president of the Connectional Council; the Executive Director and Medical Director of the Health Commission; active-duty military and veterans

> administration chaplains who have been ordained for at least four (4) years preceding the General conference and those who are retired with a minimum of twenty (20) years of service the Armed Forces of the United States; former World War II Chaplains who are in good and regular standing their annual conferences; the administrators of all Connectional institutions (i.e., Douglas Hospital); the President of the Connectional Presiding Elders Council, and elected clergy and lay delegates from each annual conference which shall include a minimum of two (2) delegates that are members of RAYAC.

The second document is a five-year plan of action for smaller and larger AME local congregations, with small churches being identified as those with less than two hundred and fifty members and large churches are identified as those with a minimum of two hundred and fifty-one members. This document will incorporate five themes to address the lack of a culture of inclusion in local AME churches. While the legislative document can bring about a structural change, there must also be a cultural change to undergird the legislation, providing greater inclusion for the generational demographic and the issues concerning young adults. All too often, when discussing these issues, our denominational leaders spend a lot of time discussing ideas and little time discussing specific strategic implementation plans. To that end, this section provides a clear action plan, on a one, three, and five-year time frame.

Concrete Action Plan

The five themes guiding the five-year plan are as follows:

(1) Empower and grow the influence of RAYAC

The research from the interview responses and the group discussion pinpoints a need for organizational growth and more significant influence in legislative issues as well as in the casting of the vision for the church's future. This begins with the establishment of RAYAC within every local church. Those churches that promote a consistency of RAYAC across the AME connection should assist those who do not have RAYAC. By the mere presence of this organization in every church, its influence will automatically grow. All the participants indicated a lack of presence in too many key decision-making roles and structures. Where there is no presence, there can be no influence. A strategic evangelistic plan must be enacted to attract and maintain young adults.

Year 1 Small Churches: Organize a local RAYAC in your church and or community.

Larger Churches: Assist smaller or newer RAYAC with membership organization, structure, and function.

Year 3 Smaller Churches: Partner with larger RAYAC groups to establish programmatic focus on both internal and external services.

Larger Churches : Establish community partnerships with grassroot organizations who share the same interests.

Year 5 Smaller Churches: Work with the local pastor in assuming leadership positions within the local church.

Larger Churches: Campaign for connectional leadership positions to provide

greater visibility to RAYAC and to promote an issue agenda pertinent to the concerns of this age group.

(2) Underwrite youth participation in general conference

While elected and selected delegates attend the General Conference with little to no out-of-pocket expenses, all other attendees must finance their own travel, lodging, and meals for the duration of the general conference. Most young adults cannot afford this expense and with significantly restricting representation, their concerns should be addressed entirely at this critical meeting. The interview process suggested that not only should the AME Church pay for the delegates, but since it was determined that the departure from the AME Church by young adults was a severe threat to the future of the denomination, there should be some underwriting of the costs for a determined number of young adults to attend the General Conference, even if they are not delegates.

Year 1 Smaller Churches: Establish budgetary line item in the local church for young adult representation. Create fundraisers to contribute to this line item.

Larger Churches: Set aside 5% of local church annual revenue for young adult general conference fund.

Year 3 Smaller Churches: Set aside 3% of annual revenue as additional resources for this budgetary line item.

Larger Churches: Solicit grants and religious philanthropic resources to aid in undergirding general conference expenditures.

Year 5 Smaller Churches: Increase local church budgetary allocation to 7% and establish larger fundraising events.

Larger Churches: Increase annual revenue to 7%, financially assist smaller churches with a specified dollar amount to be used in their Young Adult General Conference fund. Submit legislation for the General Church to fund a minimum of two young adults to attend the General Conference.

(3) Greater involvement of youth at local church level

No change can be made at the connectional level of the church without it first being made at the local church level. Suppose there are no young adults at the local church level in leadership positions, or even present the makeup of the congregation in any significant way. In that case, the hopes of connectional influence, as well as issue engagement is all but lost. The interview findings suggest a need for greater local church inclusion, which starts with evangelism and retainment. These findings mirror the strategic plan analysis performed in 2002, over 20 years ago. Many young adults feel that the church has become a place of judgment and ridicule, thus the exodus of young adults and the difficulty in attracting new ones.

Year 1 Smaller Churches: Employ targeted evangelistic programs to attract young adults.

	Larger Churches: Establish ministries designed to meet the spiritual needs of young adults, which would be communicated by group discussion and anonymous survey.
Year 3	Smaller Churches: Create platforms for greater inclusion in the planning of worship and outreach programming.
	Larger Churches: Establish avenues for partnership with grassroots organizations, local colleges, and universities and permit the advocating for political and justice issues that impact their respective communities.
Year 5	Smaller Churches: Establish a training paradigm for young adults to assume leadership positions within the church alongside the older and more established officers of the church.
	Larger Churches: Incorporate young adults into the church's leadership structure as well as the vision casting regarding the long-term health and life of the church.

(4) Greater involvement in social justice issues

The interviews communicated a greater need for the church to be involved in social justice issues. Concerns around voter suppression, gun violence, police brutality, and sexual orientation discrimination are all issues that the young adults interviewed for this project believe that the church does not do a good enough job of discussing or addressing. Many churches do not have social justice mantras despite the justice legacy of the AME Church. The young adults

believe that the Christian faith should compel us to actively engage in the liberation of all persons.

Year 1	Smaller Churches: Connect with your local elected leadership to discuss local policies that impact the lives of residents in the surrounding geographical area. Larger Churches: Engage in the political process by sponsoring candidate forums, town hall meetings, and other informative gatherings around critical issues impacting the surrounding community.
Year 3	Smaller Churches: Volunteer for citizen committees within the local elected official offices to develop more significant relationships with elected officials and position the church to be a point of mediation and contact between elected officials and the at-large community. Larger Churches: Partner with other organizations that share the same values and interests around pertinent justice issues, such as gun violence and voter suppression, and who are already doing justice work in those areas.
Year 5	Smaller Churches: Encourage members to seek local office by galvanizing the faith community, grassroots organizations, and civic organizations. Larger Churches: Work with local organizations and the faith community to craft legislation to be submitted to the larger state houses to enhance and protect the lives of the community members, who are also the constituents of the elected officials.

(5) Supporting sexual diversity

The issue of gender justice was broached at the last General Conference in 2021 with much controversy, as the body of voting delegates voted down a bill for gender inclusion. However, the need for ministry to this marginalized community still exists. Many members of the AME Church wish to take up the mantle of inclusion, particularly those in RAYAC and other concerned parties. Some are a part of advocacy groups and attend gender-affirming churches in addition to their local AME Church. The information from this study shows that ministry to and with the LGBTQ+ community is an urgent matter of meaningful engagement. Since same-sex unions are the law in all fifty states in America, the church must balance its theological position on the subject with the notion of love that we strive to exhibit.

Year 1	Smaller: Hold structured and intentional conversations around gender identity and sexuality issues. Invite LGBTQ+ advocacy groups to lead these discussions.
	Larger: Hold structured and intentional conversations around gender identity and sexuality issues. Invite LGBTQ+ advocacy groups to lead these discussions.
Year 3	Smaller Churches: Define the role of the church in advocating for equity and diversity for communities that have been discriminated against based upon sexuality issues.
	Larger Churches: Utilize professional resources within the church to reinforce the

	importance of diversity in faith communities. This should include, but not be limited to, medical professionals, counselors, justice activists, and members of the impacted community.
Year 5	Smaller Churches: Demonstrate the willingness to project an environment of equity and diversity by extending invitations to the LGBTQ+ community and advocates to worship and work together socially, politically, and religiously. Larger Churches: Partner with gender-affirming congregations to worship together and promote a social and legislative agenda that renounces the discriminatory practices against any person based upon issues of sexuality.

According to the participants in this project, the future looks uncertain. They have outlined some detailed prescriptions but are utterly unsure regarding the willingness of the church to engage on these legislative and culturally proposals. While there appears to be a hint of optimism overall, there is yet to be a caution that the generational divide will continue to stifle any real significant change in young adult engagement.

The immediate past contains much frustration and anguish for these young adults. However, there are some bright spots in an otherwise dark dilemma. The relationships with certain members of the AME Church provide hope that has not existed for some time amongst these persons. The answer begins with including young adults at the local church level. Today, there is an expressed optimism as many local pastors have concluded that there is a need for a more significant young adult presence in their churches. From the issues of technology to

receiving a greater insight on matters of justice or questions regarding the deepening of one's faith, the dependency upon young adults has become more vital than ever. These participants hope that they can be a part of a great solution to the significant problem of the lack of young adult inclusion.

Chapter 6: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter will begin by discussing the limitations of this project. It will include, but not be limited to, elements such as the sample size, the geographical restriction, the limited number of participants, the absence of specific voices from leadership, and the lack of clergy gender representation in the individual interviews. Next, the chapter will discuss the implications relative to the subject matter and highlight some recommendations to be applied to the challenge examined in this project. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an outlook on successful implementation of the prescribed solutions, which call for a strategic blueprint, describes the key personnel, and will conclude with an outlook on a failure to address the critical issues of young adult exclusion and departures, and what it will mean for the future of the AME Church.

Limitations

This project has various limitations that can be further engaged in future research and writing. The first restriction was the sample size. This project centered on young adults within the 13th Episcopal district, specifically within the Nashville area. This small sample geographical size could not be reliable in making a broad assessment as it only represents a small fraction of the members of RAYAC in the 13th Episcopal district, which comprises the states of Tennessee and Kentucky, and an even smaller microcosm of the connectional AME Church. The focus group discussion was a part of a larger agenda and only contained twelve participants. With the overall total membership of RAYAC being nearly 2,000, with a representation of 90

as delegates to the last General Conference, the small sample, while seemingly indicative of the more significant number, cannot be reliable due to the minute nature of its size in contrast to those numbers. Even if this project were to include all the members of RAYAC in the 13th Episcopal district, that would only constitute one district out of twenty. While this study does assess the issue of young adult exclusion in a more global context, the sample size would undoubtedly need to increase drastically for the sake of reliability and deeper consistency with the statistical information present in this project. While the 18 persons noted in this project provided keen insight, which is consistent with the thesis of the author of this project, it also provides a limited scope when considering the overall numerical picture of the 39 countries where AME Churches exist.

The following limitation was the need for the inclusion of our overseas districts. Presently, the AME church, as previously stated, is represented in 39 countries on five different continents. This project did not include the vast diversity represented within the age group of 21-39 across this enormous geographic scope. Doing so provided a potential contrast between the young adults in the U.S. and those from the other 38 countries. The elected delegate data from the 2021 General Conference suggest that only 5.8% of the overall elected delegation fell within this age group as part of the 1,517 elected delegates. In Districts 14-20, which represent all other countries outside of the U.S., There were 285 elected delegates, and only 6.3% or 18 persons in the age range of 21-39 were represented from the overseas district. This states a slight increase of .5% in the overseas districts versus the episcopal districts in the United States.[39] While this is a

[39] Houston, "Minutes", https://www.ame-church.com/conferences-meetings/2021-general-conference-minutes/.

slight increase, these numbers are still very much in concert with the numbers representing young adult participation in the General Conference from the U.S. While the numbers are similar, the rationale could have very much been different, and in future research and writings, these things may be explored to provide additional context for the low representation in districts 14-20. Considerations such as travel budgets, technology, and fiscal resources must be included at a higher level for the overseas districts than their U.S. counterparts.

There were only five direct interviews and one group discussion containing 12 individuals. While these persons were RAYAC members and represented several other young adults in both presence and perspective, this small sampling would only represent 19% of the 90 elected delegates at the preceding General Conference. More significant numbers provide more excellent reliability for proof of the thesis and greater input on the subject matter. Very often, polls that make a particular claim only contain a limited sample size, which can bring the accuracy of the proposed claim into question. While this study showed very slight variation in opinion relative to the individual interviews as well as the focus group, a more significant number of individuals who could have potentially provided either more instances of agreement to substantiate the initial claims of this project or provided alternative perspectives, indicating a more diverse perspective, would both be equally beneficial for the overall future of the AME Church.

No Bishops were interviewed for this project. While there are currently 21 Bishops who govern the work of the AME Church, one per episcopal district and one designated as the ecumenical Bishop, these persons were not a part of this project. The perspective of the Bishops could provide a lens into the nature in which the leadership of the church views the issue of young adult inclusion from various aspects. First, the Bishops could have provided perspectives

from the times of their tenure as a young adult in the AME Church. This would give insight to the thought patterns and concerns of young adults from previous generations, allowing a contrast to be made between that and the young adults of this day. Since all the current bench of Bishops range in age from 53 to 74 years of age, their perspectives from being a young adult to a more seasoned member of the denomination would be valuable information in tracing the history of this issue, as well as gleaning some understanding of how it was handled during the time of their young adult years. Given that all clergy emerge from the laity, I'm sure they either entertained the discussion of young adult inclusion or were actively involved in pursuing a greater level of inclusion themselves. It would also be very insightful to know how they each dealt with this issue in their pastoral ministries. As pastors, we are often tasked with coming up with critical solutions to difficult problems. It would be very interesting to ascertain if this issue was addressed during their respective pastoral ministries and how they engaged the issue during that time. Moving from the laity to the pastorate allows for an individual to engage issues from both sides within the framework of the denomination. It would be interesting to note if potential solutions that they proposed as young adults themselves were implemented once they themselves became pastors. Finally, it will be very interesting to know how they intend to address this issue as a Bishop within their respective episcopal districts. As a Bishop, an individual must assume the responsibility of being the chief pastor not only to the membership of local churches within the geographical framework of the episcopal district but also to all the clergy within that district. In a plenary meeting session at an annual conference in the previous episcopal district I served in, I once listened to a Bishop say, "Many of the traditional and conservative-leaning leaders we have in the church now were once very radical regarding issues of inclusion and justice. However, once they got elected, they were co-opted by the cultural system that does not always

lend itself to best practices regarding fairness." This limitation robbed this project of integral insight that would not only have shed light on the perpetual nature of this issue, but also the perspectives that were held years ago in contrast or in concert with the perspectives held by young adults today. Only the Bishops of the church can speak to an issue from these three different perspectives as laity, clergy and as an elected and consecrated Bishop. The insight they would provide would prove to be very invaluable resources in addressing and hopefully resolving this issue for the future of the church.

One of the frustrating aspects of this project was the limited amount of resources and data available to help substantiate a claim that many of us make somewhat subjectively by mere observation and unofficial conversation. For a denomination that prides itself on reporting of statistical data, it was somewhat disheartening to discover that much of the statistical data contained in this project had to be compiled by the writer. This is a denomination that has a Chief Information Officer who houses data provided by local congregations and all auxiliaries of the church. Again, the AME Church has a 5-level denominational structure that requires reporting on all levels. There is the local church conference, the presiding elder's quarterly conference, the annual conference, the episcopal district conference, and the general conference. Each of these levels has its reporting structure and data-capturing mechanisms built within. Yet, with all the gathering of numerical and financial information, there was no current reporting on the number of young adults within the AME Church, even though every church reports the number of members by age demographic every three months at their respective quarterly conferences. It begs the question: is this an oversight and an intentional omission of information? To research this information for this demographic, one is indeed left to their own resources and strategies. Even though a strategic plan outlined the issue of young adult attendance and

departure as a critical issue facing the denomination, there was no numerical substantiation to the substantiation claim. Another element lacking for a deeper dive into young adult exclusion and departure was the lack of fiscal resources available to the writer and on the connectional level. Being fiscally limited made it next to impossible to interface with particular persons, compile information, travel to meet with key personnel who may have profoundly impacted this project, or award individuals for their time and energy contributed to the project. Not only fiscal resources but human resources would have been well utilized in the formation and construction of this project.

The project, though limited in participant size, did include a diverse cross-section in as much as it possibly could have, given there were only five individual interviews and 12 persons involved in the focus group. However, one glaring omission of this project was female clergy, even though the sampling was small. While this project focuses on the marginalization of young adults within the AME Church, it must also recognize the concept of marginalization within the AME Church regarding other specific demographics. To this end, the lack of young adult female clergy constitutes a limitation for the project in that many of our female clergy not only endure age marginalization but also gender marginalization. Their contribution to this project would provide other invaluable and necessary information to pinpoint the depth of this problem accurately but also provide additional insight regarding potential resolutions. While the project did not seek to exclude the female clergy voice intentionally, its absence certainly leaves the project devoid of holistic perspectives, which must include gender and other factors previously mentioned. Many of our young female clergy not only face age discrimination and marginalization, but their gender is also included in the rationale to keep them in certain positions. In the corporate world, often, women of color are called a double minority. In the

ecclesiastical world, a young female clergyperson can be viewed through the same lens. While attempting to lead people into sacred and secular liberation, too often, the church finds itself replicating the same discriminatory practices and mindsets that exist in the secular world. Many times, the gifts and graces of young people are separate from the context of bringing a vision to pass for an institution or Corporation. Climbing the corporate ladder or one's ability to do so often hinges on age and gender. To this end, the lack of a female clergyperson in this project provides a glaring limitation that the writer will address in future writings.

The lack of a historical context about young adults' involvement in the movement and progression of the AME Church also proved to be a tremendous limitation for this project. Again, for a denomination that prides itself on its history and its ability to keep meticulous records regarding the founding and expansion of the AME Church and the key individuals who made significant contributions to the expansion of this African-American institution, there seems to be little to no historical context of the involvement and critical roles that young adults have played in creating a denomination founded by formerly enslaved people, breaking away from St George's Methodist Episcopal Church and establishing its first house of worship in a blacksmith shop, to now being present in 39 countries and five continents around the world and boasting a membership of over 2.5 million members. While the contributions of key personalities such as the Four Horsemen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which are Richard Allen, Daniel Payne, Henry McNeal Turner, and Paul Quinn, noted as the church began to grow, unfortunately, the energy, expertise and bravery of many young adults who contributed heavily to this growth and expansion is omitted. It is sad that the contributions of younger people have not been chronicled. Ironically, much of this generational exclusion is because many of the persons who were members of the AME Church at this time were between the ages of 21 and 39. So to this

end, there are many contributions that don't get denoted as being made by young adults but simply former and freed slaves who were able to accomplish this tremendous ecclesiastical achievement. However, when looking back upon this time in history, it must be noted that these persons were the young adults of their time. If the young adults of this time could make such a tremendous contribution not only to the ecclesiastical world but also to American society in general, how much more should the accomplishments, achievements, and gifts of young adults be incorporated and celebrated today? This indeed is a history that should not remain unrepeated but should be replicated even in today's time.

While two potential solutions have been proposed to address the issue of young adult marginalization and exclusion in this project, the writer also realizes that many other solutions could be presented to manage this disorder. This project is limited in the context of proposed solutions, as the emphasis on the individual interview process and the dialogue in the 12-member focus group was not primarily centered on solution orientation but also on extracting deeper aspects of the problem itself. Before a solution can be constructed or even proposed, the validity of the problem must be thoroughly presented. For many members of the AME Church, the issue of young adult inclusion has not been of vital concern because this problem has gone unaddressed for so long. Many members of this great denomination have become apathetic to the danger we face as a denomination because of this problem. Where there is no perceived problem, there will surely be no intentional addressing or construction of a solution. While this project contains one piece of proposed legislation, there are certainly others that could be entertained as well for the sake of remedying this issue of young adult exclusion. In addition to the legislative solutions that this project presents, there must also be solutions that can be implemented at the local level of the church to shift the culture that so quickly excludes this vital demographic of

young adults. Whether there is greater training for the ministers who will soon be pastors in this denomination or whether there is training through the organized laity of the denomination that focuses on the importance of having young adults as a critical demographic, there must be tools available to assist the local church at every geographical context, whether it is urban, suburban or rural and also for every size of church, whether it has thousands, hundreds, or tens. Other proposed solutions might include a more ecumenical approach whereby AME churches partner with and glean from churches of different denominations, grassroots organizations, and civic organizations to examine how they incorporate young adults and utilize their gifts and talents for the vision of their institutions. This also must include an extensive interrogation of our current practices to examine further untapped areas of study, chronicling, and incorporation of young adults in vision formation and vision casting at every level of the AME Church.

As it is with secular politics, so it is with ecclesiastical politics. Any proposed legislation must be vetted properly to ensure that it addresses a glaring issue that impacts many persons and that enough people in the power structure see this as a problem and will gather support to address it. In many instances, we do not have the appropriate amount of time to properly vet a piece of legislation so that it can be examined and interrogated by the various stakeholders within the church on all levels. This limited amount of time for a piece of legislation to be properly vetted often results in that legislation being carried over from one General Conference to the next without any natural movement or traction to address the problem in the interim. While there is a mechanism in place to review and examine proposed legislation, often those who study and examine the legislatineed to become morenot familiar with the particularities of the proposed problem and thus, they cannot begin to explore the possibilities for a legislative solution thoroughly. While anyone within the denomination can propose legislation and can be vetted

through the process of our legislative conferences, which are meetings to examine the validity of a piece of proposed legislation, the determination of whether a piece of legislation even gets to the floor of the general conference to be voted upon by the body of delegates is relegated to a small committee entitled the committee on revisions. This body meets one week before the opening of the upcoming General Conference. There needs to be more time, and they need to possess more information to adequately vote in the best interest of the denomination regarding a piece of proposed legislation. So, it is very often because of this limitation on time that a piece of critical legislation may be passed on from one general conference to the next with little discussion in between.must be more time given to the legislative process of the AME Church as we begin to deal with critical justice issues and structural issues regarding the church's future church. Having a convocation that meets semi-annually is far too little time to spend addressing what may be potentially life-changing and life-altering issues for the church and its membership. A more significant investment in time will allow for greater research and evaluation of the legislative issue and the appropriate legislative process.

As previously stated, the absence of demographic studies within the context of the office of the Chief Information Officer is a definite limitation to legislative processes, critical analysis, and substantial research. Relative to this project, the limit on available information hindered the ability of the writer to make comparative conclusions, Which would have aided in the process of drafting potential legislation as well as the construction of a tool for local churches to utilize in attracting and maintaining young adults within the AME church. Having to extract information from minutes of previous meetings, construct my tables of data, as well as Chronicle the numbers to create a statistical presentation that would ultimately highlight the proposed problem and showcase the need for addressing it was far more arduous than it needed to be. By having

this information now at my disposal, it can be utilized to move forward not only in the conversations regarding young adult marginalization within the AME church but also to enhance proposed solutions contained within this project, as well as create new solutions to further propel the church into the place of generational equity and holistic representation. This project also provides information to make it possible for the office of the Central Intelligence Officer to begin creating reports regarding the demographics of our denomination. Those demographics should be denoted by age, gender, and the locations of our various local churches.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications highlighted in this project range from legislative to cultural and pastoral implications. If this project and those that may come after it of similar focus are not taken seriously, the church may continue to lose out on a critical demographic germane to its survival and future. As a denomination that prides itself on being born in the crucible of justice and having a history of working at the forefront of liberation initiatives, we must recognize the marginalization that exists within our confines. Failure to do so will not only make us hypocritical in presenting our identity but also causes us to fall far short of the mission of the AME Church. Moreover, we do not exhibit a heartfelt intentionality regarding the acceptance of our shortcomings as well as the resistance that we have in being inclusive. In that case, we may very well be guilty of erroneous ecclesiastical reprobation as it relates to embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion in our own proverbial backyard.

We must have legislation incorporating detailed demographics, but not only that, we must have legislation created to mandate what information should be available from the office of the

Chief Information Officer. That legislation must also necessitate that any person within the denomination should have access to it, particularly for academic research, legislation creation, and programmatic implementation. As previously stated in this project, legislative implementation with cultural transition can result in forced compliance. Therefore, we need legislative answers and systemic tools to create different narratives at all levels of the AME Church. They should be present in our evangelistic thrust and our efforts for liberation within and without the AME Church.

To this end, we must legislate the inclusion of young adults so that there is greater representation in every voting body, in positions of authority in the local church and on the various levels of our denomination. In as much as affirmative action was instituted legislatively to incorporate a greater sense of equity and inclusion and to eliminate the forces that would marginalize specific communities and demographics, we in the AME Church must be willing to acknowledge a need for such legislation. Then, we must exercise the bravery to implement it.

This means that local steward boards and trustee boards should contain a minimum of 25% young adults. This further should translate into more significant opportunities for young adult clergy to become pastors of local churches that can afford to pay them a full-time salary and to become presiding elders after four years of effective pastoral ministry. Many of our young adult clergy are bi-vocational. Their secular jobs often place them in management or supervisory roles, which help them develop and hone the administrative acumen to lead the church on various levels. They are usually kept from these positions because of their age and alleged lack of experience.

The legislation for greater inclusion in the general conference, proposed in this project, should also be undergirded with a fiscal injection to cover the expenses of young adult delegates

attending the general conference. These funds should be allocated for travel, lodging, and sustenance. Akin to the effect of affirmative action laws, a failure to implement these needed changes will continue to result in the marginalization of young adults and create a greater exodus of this demographic from the AME Church.

There must also be legislation that mandates inclusion at the episcopal district level. Bishops have the authority to appoint clergy and laity young adults to key positions within an episcopal district. The unfortunate truth is that unless mandated legislatively to do so and held to the legislative standard once it is passed, there will continue to be an absence of young adults serving in leadership positions at the episcopal district level. Legislation is often required where persons in power or positions of influence seemingly need more will or interest to make these necessary inclusionary changes. The prioritization issue must be present in the legislative platform of every institution, whether it be in secular politics or ecclesiastical governance. Thus, we must consider what we mean when we say that a church or any faith institution is successful or thriving. I have always believed that a successful church is one that consistently achieves its goals and provides tangible evidence of living out its mission. Emmanuel Y. Amugi Lartey states, "For many church leaders and members, thriving is understood in numerical and financial terms. A church's budget and the finances at its disposal often define a thriving church.[40]" While I have seen this become the very focus of the AME Church, particularly at the local church and episcopal district levels, I don't believe that the hierarchy of our denomination understands what this defining of success creates. Many AME pastors who hold Lartey's view aim to produce a

[40] Dale P. Andrews, Robert L. Smith Jr., and Emmanuel Y. Lartey. *Black Practical Theology*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015): 206.

healthy budget instead of having healthy people. While spirituality and morality cannot be solved through legislative engagement, legislation can be used to foster environments that would help cultivate atmospheres conducive to producing numbers without sacrificing any of God's people in the process.

The AME Church is structured on a five-tier conference system. It begins with the local church conference, followed by the quarterly conference, the annual conference, the episcopal district conference, and the general conference. Inclusivity for young adults at the various levels of the church suggests that there must be a consistent presence of young adult representation at the very foundation, which is the local church. If there is no young adult presence at the local church, there will surely be none at the other four levels of the AME Church. This would translate not only in the absence of those persons being present in critical decision-making and vision casting places within the church but also ensure that the issues germane to this generation will go inadequately addressed if not completely overlooked altogether.

Simply stated, the general conference can legislate, and the local church can activate, but there must still be a motivation at the quarterly, annual, and episcopal district conference levels to make right this long-enduring wrong. Much of what happens at the levels above the local church is out of the hands of young adults because they are not present, not because they are not qualified to be present, but because they have been traditionally excluded for so long that exclusion has become an accepted norm. Church politics, nepotism, and cronyism have infiltrated the construct of the AME Church to the point that marginalization has become a normal part of our regular operation.

A failure to acknowledge these cancers within our sacred institution can only result in the malignancy of the cancer spreading until, ultimately, it results in the demise of the institution. At

the presiding elder district level of the church, where the quarterly conference takes place, the elder can appoint young adults to key committees at this level. In doing so, it would represent a seriousness in ensuring that not only are young adults present at various levels of the church but also that the gifts, talents, and expertise in which they utilize every day in their regular secular jobs can be brought to the church for the enhancement of our operation and mission.

We should pay more attention to the gifts and graces of this overlooked demographic to ensure that persons who are more tenured can secure these positions for the sake of power but not necessarily for the sake of progress. In my 21 years of pastoral ministry, I have witnessed many AME Church members lament that other denominational bodies have duplicated much of the structure and programmatic paradigms of the AME Church and are highly successful with its usage. This lamentation continues with the question, 'Why aren't we using our own systems to bring about a vibrancy within our own denomination?' I believe the answer to that question is that while other denominational bodies have adopted many of our programmatic structures and systematic constructs, they have not extracted or duplicated our culture.

In the African Methodism culture, personal agendas, selfishness, and greed have thwarted in many instances and tainted in others, the potential effectiveness of operating within the traditional systems of African Methodism. I have seen other denominations utilize a conference structure, a class leader system, an ordination process, and even a framework for itinerancy. Still, they have done so without many of the environmental nuances that too often steer the AME Church off the course of its original intended mission into the agendas of those who seek power and those who want to maintain power. If the conference system were utilized to conduct the church's business and promote the individual members who comprise the church, we would be a much better faith community.

It has become very clear to me that it is not enough to have an effective tool if you don't know how to manage its effectiveness. Many young adults have been demonized for going to conferences outside of the denomination and engaging with other communities of faith to glean what they believe they are not receiving within African Methodist. I have been an individual who has gone to other conferences, engaged with other faith communities, and embraced other systems of thought as it relates to what it truly means to be a member of the body of Christ, not just a member of the AME Church. While we could certainly use our time and structure to provide the information, mentorship, exposure, and other pertinent enlightenment to our clergy and our laity of all demographics, we often feel short of providing critical information needed to minister in today's world.

In times past, because blind denominational loyalty and a sense of generational indebtedness kept many from seeking refuge outside of the denomination, we have reached a point where a new generation has emerged that does not embrace such ecclesiastical fidelity without receiving something in return. In return, they are looking for the spiritual quipping that will help them to handle today's problems, manage their families, their careers, their health, and, of course, their spirituality. Our structure could be used to introduce God in various aspects to people so that they may grow in a holistic understanding of who God is and, moreover, who they are in God.

The church should also be engaged in developing people for leadership in the Christian church and in the community at large. It is the church that should be producing the presidents, the managers, the CEOs, the CFOs, the activists, the doctors, the lawyers, the public speakers, and those who make policies that govern our communities and world. Each level of the five-conference system of the AME Church provides an opportunity for young adults to be engaged

in the church's vision from various perspectives. These engagements also produce the leaders and thinkers of today and tomorrow, however, if we are overly consumed with today, we will not prepare for tomorrow or those who must lead it. This is too often what happens in the AME Church; unfortunately, the brunt and anguish of the mishandling of our system falls upon young adults.

By operating under Episcopalian governance and manifesting this through a conference system, each level of the system or each conference, must be intentional regarding the utilization of young adults, not only for effectiveness at this level but also as training for the next. This would allow young adults to not only have a key stakeholder seat at the table but also encourage others to be a part of this Dynamic institution called the AME Church, providing the assurance that they are not only welcomed but also wanted and needed. The current hegemonic context in which the AME church now resides does a severe disservice to the structure that we have at our disposal. We must continue developing tools, conducting workshops, bringing in speakers, engaging activists, interrogating our practices, and utilizing critical thinking to resolve this grave issue that continues to grow within our church.

A failure to address the issue of young adult marginalization will not only impact RAYAC, the organized young adult ministry of the AME Church, but it will undoubtedly impact the connectional church. Like any major issue, we can choose to ignore it, minimize it, justify it, or perpetuate the status quo of marginalization, but to do so will prove highly detrimental. Suppose I think about my context as the pastor of the greater Bethel AME Church in Nashville, considering the theological perspective of our local church and the social issues that confront us daily. In that case, I am greatly concerned that too many of our members do not feel a sense of urgency concerning this issue. Bringing young adults back to the church, which was the

communicated desire upon my arrival at Greater Bethel in 2022, must be a desire born out of faith, not aesthetics. However, many persons merely want an injection of young adult appearance to constitute the makeup of an ideal congregation, not necessarily because of their critical nature to the church's life going into the future.

This brings us to the question of inactivity: if we do not act, will we die? I often ask our congregation, "Do you know how to grow a green healthy lawn?" After a period of silence, I inform them that to have a green healthy lawn one must engage in various activities concerning the soil. One must engage in the practice of thatching, that is the vigorous removal of dead grass and debris. One must engage in fertilization, that is the application of fertilizer so that soil will become productive and conducive for growth. One must be attentive to watering, ensuring that the nutrients that come from water which provide a chief element for the process of photosynthesis is needed on a regular basis. There must be rigorous engagement. I then asked the congregation, "Do you know what to do to grow a yard full of weeds?" After watching their bewildered their faces for a few moments, I answer by saying, "Nothing." There are certain things that will take place all by themselves if you simply do nothing. However, whatever the product of doing nothing is, it generally is not something to be desired.

If we do nothing regarding the marginalization of young adults within the AME Church, we will indeed commit to the ultimate demise of the church. The most frightening aspect of this truth is that the demise does not occur immediately or is not recognized immediately. A slow death can be the most dangerous kind because it happens unannounced and unassumingly. Many organizations and institutions that we thought would never go away have dissipated in time due to a failure to change or address a particular issue that did not seemingly pose any immediate threat or represent any imminent danger. A failure to act will bring about a slow death in the

AME Church because we never consider the issue of attrition; we assume that the institution that has been here will always be here. Unfortunately, when an institution or an organism fails to adapt or change to a new environment or shifting conditions, the inevitable conclusion is extinction. This is similar to a physician who may have a hard time convincing a patient that they need to make dietary changes as well as lifestyle changes to achieve a certain level of health when the patient believes that they feel great and that there is nothing wrong with their health, so it is often with members of the church who think that all is well despite the mounting evidence that speaks contrary to this notion.

Cautionary Tale

The AME Church has a proud history that began in protest in 1787 at the St George's Methodist Episcopal Church. There, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones led a protest of African worshipers out of that church due to a lack of inclusion at the time of prayer. The AMEC grew from the Free African Society (FAS), which Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. When officials at St. George's MEC pulled Blacks off their knees while praying, FAS members discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans. Hence, these St. George's members planned to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation. Although most wanted to affiliate with the Protestant Episcopal Church, Allen led a small group that resolved to remain Methodists. In 1794, Bethel AME was dedicated with Allen as pastor. To establish Bethel's independence from interfering white Methodists, Allen, a former Delaware slave, successfully sued in the Pennsylvania courts in 1807 and 1815 for the right of his congregation to exist as an independent institution. Because Black Methodists in other Middle Atlantic

communities encountered racism and desired religious autonomy, Allen called them to meet in Philadelphia to form a new Wesleyan denomination, the AME[41]. This rich history is now in grave jeopardy if we do not enact swift and decisive change to how we have treated young adults over the last fifty years.

All organisms and institutions must undergo an adaptive change at some point to remain in existence and maintain a sense of relevance. The irony of this change is that it centers on including a marginalized community within the church, which mirrors why the AME Church was founded back in 1787 as the Free African Society, which later became the AME Church. The richness of the history of the AME Church, which was born in protest to the intentional exclusion of African Americans, stands in juxtaposition with the marginalization of young adults within the church at this current time. The paradox of the current situation as it relates to young adults serves as a cautionary tale regarding power and power structures. In all institutions, power shows up in a particular way; however, in Western culture, it often presents itself as a dominant force over others, or at the very least, it resides at the highest level of a hierarchical context without sharing power with others. Within these contexts, discrimination and marginalization often exist for those in power to remain in power.

When we discuss the influences of secular culture upon Ecclesia, we often limit that conversation to attire and preference of worship style; however, we do not usually take a deep dive into examining how we are treating one another and the close similarities that our behavior has with those who exercise power in secular contexts. Jesus was very explicit in his words to his

[41] Dennis C. Dickerson, "African Methodist Episcopal Church/History." Ame-church.Com. African Methodist Episcopal Church, Accessed January 15, 2024. https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/.

disciples in the twentieth chapter of the gospel of Matthew that power was not to be used to laud it over people as the Gentiles do, but they were to exercise love, kindness, inclusion, and be of service (Matthew 20:25-28).

This clear departure from the mission and vision of the AME Church since its inception places the church in grave danger. The history of the AME Church suggests that it was birthed to be an institution that fought for equality, stood against all forms of hegemony, and positioned itself within the interstices that exist amongst all global communities of humanity. All institutions have a history, especially churches.

One of the key elements this project attempts to communicate is the need to celebrate history and build upon history but not rely upon history or repeat its negative aspects. We understand historically that persons who are in power often remain in power by marginalizing others. If we do not learn the lessons from authoritarian governments, patriarchal systems, or generation-favoring paradigms, it is my deep concern that we will suffer a similar fate as all of these. The AME Church will no longer be able to rely upon denominational loyalty as it is dwindling at the same rate or perhaps even more alarming rates than overall loyalty to the Black church is for young adults.

Though many of the Black unchurched grew up in or around the church, those roots have weakened over the generations; approximately three-fifths of unchurched millennials (58%) attended church regularly in the past, a distinctly lower proportion than older age groups.[42] Hence, we can no longer rely upon family ties to assure that the new generation of young adults

[42] Barna, *Trends*, 57.

will remain loyal and steadfast to the AME church as the previously stated statistic tells us the generational ties to the church are not as present nor powerful as they once were. In the AME Church, I have seen young adults question, protest, and stand up against some of the cultural practices that would not allow them to have a voice for themselves or the issues that they believe the church is neglecting. This has had an immense impact on morale, as stated in the earlier interviews in this project. There yet remains a hope for change, the current situation needs to be revised to this generation.

As I have observed young adults leaving the AME Church, both clergy and laity, I am convinced that this is a grave threat not only to the existence of a future but also for the relevance of the present. In the world of sports, many teams have been accused of playing a game not to lose but not necessarily to win. I believe this statement could easily apply in principle to the AME church. For far too long, we have been operating to exist but not necessarily to thrive, to have members but not necessarily to evangelize our communities, to worship with but not necessarily to serve each other, to encounter but not necessarily to engage those who do not possess our religious pedigree. Consequently, to find a religious and spiritual Community, many young adults have now sought Refuge outside of the confines of the AME Church and other faith communities or in grassroots organizations that speak to the issues that concern them and those they believe the church has no voice on.

The subjects whose voices appear in this project all demonstrate a disappointment with the church's position on justice, personal development, societal issues, and vocational uncertainty. Those concerns do not fix themselves, and too often, we have left young adults feeling as though they do not matter; their opinions have no merit, and their lack of tenure, titles, and experience leave them devoid of being considered as an expert or viable voice on matters of

critical importance. Nothing could be further from the truth than believing that these young adults have nothing to offer this historic Institution. A true reflection of our history would suggest that many persons inside and outside the AME church who have made great strides and sacrifices to secure the liberty of many were young adults.

As this project has already noted, several protagonists from the pages of the Bible, many of our modern-day heroes, were young adults at the time of their greatest sacrifices, including their own lives. Many of our contemporary Heroes are young adults at this very moment. a failure to include this critical demographic will amount to the horrific crime of spiritual genocide and catalyze denominational collapse. As our churches are getting older, I see voting delegates, pastors, bishops, presiding elders, and lay leaders are getting grayer if we do not implement legislative change and incorporate tools of inclusivity while embracing a broadened agenda that helps us to live out the true mission and vision of the AME Church which requires the giftings, talents, and Graces of every demographic that exists in society we may very well conclude a once great movement within the next 50 years.

As I look at institutions that have since transitioned into history, which I never thought would go away, I'm reminded that a failure to address an issue when it presents itself will only grow to the point where it can no longer be addressed. It is my hope and my prayer that we will look at both sacred and secular institutions that are no longer present and realize that what is a staple today can very easily be removed tomorrow if we fail to adhere to the warnings given to us in the current time.

It is my hope that this project will serve as such warning and that the AME Church will indeed change course as it relates to its relationship with young adults and move to a more inclusive and loving context whereby all gifts are affirmed and all humanity is embraced because

the very life of our denomination depends on it and for many their relationship with God will be severely influenced by it.

Appendix A

Definition of Terms

AME – African Methodist Episcopal

Annual Conference – A grouping of congregations in a specified geographical area to form the legal entity of Methodist polity. This is where mission, resource personnel (clergy and laity), and property are administered and a bishop is the president.

Connectional – The global collection of AME Churches from all 39 countries and five continents it represents.

Delegation – A body of representatives, generally elected from a collection of peers.

Denomination – A recognized autonomous branch of the Christian Church.

Episcopal District – A geographically contiguous grouping of Annual Conferences that work together in an administrative unit superintended by one bishop.

General Conference – The gathering of AME delegates and members every four years to pass legislative policy, present a four-year budget for the operation of the AME Church and its respective departments, and elect Bishops and General Officers.

Inclusion – The practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized from the electoral process, legislative engagement, or holding an elected or appointed position.

Itinerancy – The traveling ministry. The system of the AME Church by which itinerant ministers are appointed to their charges by the bishop.

Itinerant – A traveling deacon or elder.

Legislative – The actions of a body within an organization in exercising the power and function of making law as specifically referred to in the prepared printed "Legislative Package" given to each delegate immediately following the organization of the General Conference.

Presiding Elder - Presiding Elders are the assistants, like middle management, whom the bishops appoint to supervise the preachers in a Presiding Elder's District.

RAYAC – Richard Allen Young Adult Council, which is the organized young adult ministry of the AME Church, is composed of individuals between the ages of 21 and 39.

YAM – The Young Adult Members (YAM) are younger Missionary Sisters between the ages of 18-40 of the Connectional Women's Missionary Society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

YPD – Young People's and Children's Division

Young Adult – Persons between the ages of 21 and 39.

Appendix B

Geographical Territories of the AME Church

Episcopal District	States, Counties, or Territories	Number of Annual Conferences	Number of Presiding Elder Districts
1st Episcopal District	East and Central Pennsylvania, Bermuda, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts	7	16
2nd Episcopal District	Maryland, Washington D.C., Virginia, and North Carolina	5	8
3rd Episcopal District	Ohio, Western Pennsylvania, and West Virginia	3	8
4th Episcopal District	Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Canada, and India	6	13
5th Episcopal District	California, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Alaska, Western Canada, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska	6	13
6th Episcopal District	Georgia	6	15
7th Episcopal District	South Carolina	6	17
8th Episcopal District	Mississippi and Louisiana	4	12
9th Episcopal District	Alabama	5	7
10th Episcopal District	Texas	4	11
11th Episcopal District	Florida	6	11
12th Episcopal District	Oklahoma and Arkansas	4	7

13th Episcopal District	Kentucky and Tennessee	4	9
14th Episcopal District	Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo-Benin	7	11
15th Episcopal District	Cape Town, Namibia, Kalahari, Queenstown, and Angola	7	26
16th Episcopal District	Guyana-Suriname, Trinidad-Tobago, Grenada, Barbados, Virgin Islands, Dominican Republic, Haiti, London, Holland, France, and Jamaica	7	10
17th Episcopal District	Zambia, Zambezi, Katanga, The Congo, Burundi, Nakuru, Nairobi and Mombasa	12	70
18th Episcopal District	Eswatini, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Botswana	5	7
19th Episcopal District	Orangia and Natal	5	25
20th Episcopal District	Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Uganda	7	27

Appendix C

STRATEGIC PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

The Environmental Imperative

To understand the current state of the AMEC, the SPCT gathered, evaluated, and identified Extensive data including AMEC's existing wake-up calls, SWOT analyses, data on the current organizational culture, "What's Working and What's Not in AMEC," Convo reports and reporting structure, mission implementation, critical success factors, and gap analyses. Additional data was collected from *Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Annual Departmental Reports, and the *Minutes of the 46th Quadrennial Session of the Annual Conference.*

AMEC's Wake-Up Calls

From this data, the SPCT identified 13 issues as the most pressing wake-up calls for the AMEC. Wake up calls are circumstances, events, and trends in the environment that indicate that something has changed or is changing.

1. Declining membership
2. Legal problems
3. Exiting youth & young adults
4. Exit of ministers
5. Absence of men in membership
6. Loss of institutions
7. Not enough programs for senior citizens
8. "What used to be first has now become last" (Church Priorities)
9. Shortage of finance/resources
10. The lack of pride
11 Impact of world events in our lives
12. Failure to follow the AMEC Discipline and order of the Church
13. Anti-denominational sentiment

SWOT Analysis

The SPCT examined the Church's strengths and challenges while uncovering its opportunities and evaluating its threats. The SPCT found the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within the AME Church:

Strengths

- Organization Structure
- Church's long History

- Educational Institutions
- Worship and Spirituality
- Inclusion
- Communication
- Youth Involvement
- Leadership Community Outreach
- Real Property Ownership

Weaknesses

- Lack of Clergy Management, Training, & Skills
- Lack of Finance & Economic Development
- Polity
- Lack of Evangelistic Fervor
- Lack of Communications
- Lack of Youth & Young Adult Inclusion
- Lack of Church Expansion/Combination

Opportunities

- Increase Spirituality
- Outreach Ministries
- Training/Education
- Organizational changes
- Inclusion
- Technology
- Finance
- Youth Economic Development
- Church Growth

Threats

- Lack of Finance/Accountability
- Leadership-Education/Training & Moral Issues
- Lack of Youth & Young Adult Retention & Inclusion
- Loss of Members
- Tradition/Ritual/Loss of History
- Too Many Small Churches
- Legal Issues

The results of these extensive examinations are eight (8) strategic thrusts, 49 recommendations, and 34 legislative bills that focus on preparing the AMEC for growth and prosperity in the 21st century. Presented below are the strategic thrusts and the recommendations which enable positive outcomes:

1. Enhance Church Growth

a. Increase Church growth
b. Enforce accurate and truthful reporting of Church membership
c. Increase the resource pool for Evangelistic activities

d. Reconfigure Episcopal Districts
e. Incorporate Annual Conferences as IRS 501 (c)(3) corporations
f. Revisit the roles and relationship of laity and clergy
g. Continue to embrace and instill in the membership of the Church, the history, traditions, and principles of African Methodism, while being open to the changes and challenges of contemporary society.

2. Improve Leadership & Management

a. Create an Office of the Chief Administrator
b. File Annual Episcopal District Reports with the General Secretary
c. Write clear job descriptions and definitions for all positions and agencies
d. Develop performance evaluation system
e. Strictly enforce enrollment in the Ministerial Annuities Plan
f. Require all employees to receive annual educational & training concerning employee security
g. Institute measures and procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of elected/appointed leaders of the Church.

3. Support Christian Character

a. Ensure that children, youth, and young adults are not exposed to criminal sex offenders and/or criminal child abusers by qualifying children, youth & young adult workers.
b. Require individual leader accountability for operating in integrity beginning with Bishops, Presiding Elders, and leaders of all levels of the Church.
c. Develop a course requirement and/or focused study of Church administration concepts for all pastors.
d. Implement a measure that protects laypersons and ministers from being outcast when requesting financial disclosure information on all levels.
e. Bishops, Presiding Elders, and congregations support the efforts of the annual membership canvas and report its results accurately.
f. Pastors, Presiding Elders, and Bishops educate their congregation on the distributions of funds and other assessments to the Connectional Church, Episcopal District, and Annual Conference.
g. All Episcopal Districts enforce the creation of a budgetary committee on both the Episcopal District and Annual Conference levels
h. Request accurate number of members of all Churches in each Episcopal District after two Annual Conferences to be given by 2006
i. Convene a committee of the stakeholders to address the issue of culture vs. truth in reporting

4. Enhance Spiritual Growth & Development

a. Design and produce relevant and developmentally effective Sunday School Curricula
b. Develop a marketing strategy for AME Publications

5. Ensure Economic Growth & Fiduciary Accountability

a. Submit Connectional assessments

b. Submit charges quarterly
c. Require unqualified opinions on all audits
d. Establish minimum educational requirements for Chief Financial Officer
e. Institute quarterly reports
f. Increase the volume of publishing
g. Sustain global economic growth opportunities and initiatives in the AMEC by exploring and preparing specific action plans

6. Embrace Diversity

a. Create & develop a nurturing environment of mentorship at all levels of ministry for WIM
b. Create visible symbols of unity within the Life of the Church through worship experiences, study groups, and workshops
c. Incorporate inclusive language & involvement in the total Life of the Church
d. Identify, develop & promote other models of ministries including Pastoral Ministry
e. Constitute a delegated body that is representative of our diverse membership, i.e. culture, geography, language, age, gender, and function and is conducive to dialogue, debate, discussions and decisions in appropriate venue with adequate resources

7. Improve Education, Growth & Development

a. Establish Department of Educational Institutions
b. Elect the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees for each institution's governance
c. Provide training for Board members of Higher Education Institutions
d. Increase funding for theological schools
e. Develop comprehensive & competitive written resources
f. Create an editorial board to ensure biblically sound & theologically relevant material that is in adherence with AME polity
g. Conduct a feasibility study, to review the purpose, operational, and editorial functions, roles, structure, efficiency, and staffing for all departments that publish and or print publications for the AMEC

8. Enhance Global Ministry & Missions

a. Establish global missionary emergency response teams
b. Provide a caring supportive presence where the need is in the Connection and beyond
c. Establish internal and external partnerships for Global Ministry

Appendix D

IRB Research Protocol

New York Theological Seminary

Institutional Review Board Application—

Research Protocol

1. List your name, contact information, and the name of the institution, course, or project to which your research is related. List the names and contact information for your faculty advisors to this project (or note for faculty designed classroom assignments or faculty research, n/a).

Principal Investigator

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2. Explain the nature and purpose of this research. What do you hope to learn and why?

This project examines the nature of the marginalization of young adults, persons between the ages of 21-39, within the AME Church. Specifically, how can platforms of inclusion be created allowing for equal representation of the voices of young adults in key decisions regarding the future of the denomination? Moreover, how can young adults have a greater role in decision-making, vision casting and voter power? I hope to learn how the participants feel that can have a more expanded role in the future of the AME Church to aid in the creation tools to provide a greater level in equity in the denomination.

3. Describe your research methods and procedures.
Be specific. Indicate the length of time involved and the place where you plan to conduct interviews or observation. Explain how you will select or recruit participants, and how you plan to make and keep records for your research. Specify your intentions for the use of visual records, such as photographs and videotapes.

Individual interviews will be conducted with five selected individuals, one mentor activist, and a group of twelve in a focus group. The individual interviews will be conducted for a minimum of forty-five minutes to one hour via zoom. The activist/mentor interview will be conducted via zoom as well with a time frame of one hour to ninety minutes. Participants will be selected from the age group twenty-one to thirty-nine and will be members of the Greater Bethel AME Church with exception of one person who is a pastor within the selected age group. All recordings will be kept on a computer file, and all usage shall be for this project only.

4. Attach a copy of all survey instruments or a list of the questions that you intend to ask potential participants. If these questions are not completely settled, submit your tentative plans.

See Appendix C

5. Describe your relationship to the potential participants. Are you their pastor, chaplain, teacher, friend or other?

The Principal Investigator is the pastor to 4 of the 5 individual respondents. The activist mentor was the former pastor and of the principal investigator. The focus group are members of the same denomination of the principal investigator.

6. Discuss any potential benefits you envision for the participants in your study. What is the good that you hope will result from this study? What benefits, if any, will accrue to the participants?

By participating in this study, the Principal Investigator hopes to empower participants with newfound tools for engaging in equity through legislative advancements as well through a 5-year implementation plan for new engagement of young adults and the social issues raised by this age group.

7. Discuss any potential risks to the participants in your study.

Are any of your participants members of vulnerable groups (such as children, persons with stigmatizing illnesses, whistleblowers, prisoners, persons with physically or mentally disabling conditions, etc.)? Explain the measures you will take to provide for their privacy. Explain how you will respond if a participant has adverse effects as a result of your study.

None of the participants are members of vulnerable groups. Participants' privacy will be protected by the focusing on issue definition, which will ensure that participants will not have to provide any personal information outside what is pertinent. While some of the questions could possibly be emotionally or psychologically triggering, based upon prior experiences, respondents can skip any question or drop out of the interview entirely, with no expectation of reprisal.

8. Explain the policies and procedures that you will use to insure the confidentiality and or anonymity of your participants.

Will you use pseudonyms or a numerical coding system? Are there any factors other than names that might identify your research subjects? If so, what will you do to ensure anonymity? How will your data be stored? How long will the data be kept?

Only personal information germane to the study will be requested. While demographic information will be gathered from respondents, they will be collectively assessed and quantitatively analyzed. Data will be stored on a password protected Google drive. Upon completion of the dissertation, the data will be kept for five years and then destroyed.

9. Include a copy of any consent forms that you are planning to use. The language used on these forms should be clear, simple, and straightforward, not laden with technical jargon.

Consent was verbal and recorded via zoom for individual interviews and provided in person for focus group.

10.What will happen to the final report of your research? Do you plan to share the summary with the class, community, or congregation? What form will this representation take, and what media will you use? List any possible venues in which you might publish this work now or in the future.

The final report will be presented to the gathering(s) of the participants. The information will be available in written form (the actual document) as well as PowerPoint (when presented verbally by the Principal Investigator). Currently, there are no plans to publish the findings. However, future writing may be produced from this project that may include publication and distribution.

Appendix E

IRB Interview Protocol

New York Theological Seminary Informed Consent Form Introduction

My name is Byron Moore and I'm a student at New York Theological Seminary conducting research for my dissertation. My phone number is 901.457-7680. My email address is pastorbcm0902@gmail.com.

My research supervisor is Dr. Tonja Dandy. Her phone number is 615.525.6600. Her email address is *tonja.dandy@gmail.com*

(Feel free to contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.)

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the issue of young adult marginalization in the AME Church and provide legislative and operational solutions to remedy the malady. This project is dedicated to highlighting the glaring absences of young adults in key positions of authority and decision-making processes and aid in their future inclusion on all levels of the AME Church.

Procedure

If you consent to participating in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview or a focus group. There will be no commitments beyond those

engagements. Other than notes taken during the interview, no other written notes nor audio or video recordings will be utilized for the focus group. Zoom interviews will be utilized for the answering of survey interview questions and the capturing of those answers.

Time Required

While the time varies based on your answers and the flow of the conversation, most interviews take about 60-90 minutes, with the focus group lasting for 45 minutes.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You are completely free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Risks

I anticipate no known risks associated with this study. In any human subject research involving self-disclosure, there is always the possibility that you may feel discomfort or distress during the research. If this happens, please inform me immediately.

Benefits

While there are no guaranteed benefits, it is possible that you may enjoy participating in this research and/or sharing your responses to the research questions, or that you will find the project personally or spiritually meaningful, inspiring, or useful for the purposes intended.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Your name will be utilized in all the reporting and/or writing related to this study only with your consent. I will be the only person present during the project's research. When I write the final paper, thick descriptions will be utilized to provide further insight for the purposes of the project but will not surpass any nonpermitted disclosures.

Importance of Candor

It is essential to this kind of research that all responses from participants be open, candid, forthright, and honest.

Sharing the Results

Research results may be shared through class presentation, in written form, or in other ways to address the issue within the project.

Before You Sign

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in this project with the possibility of your words being written in a final paper. Be sure

that any questions you may have are answered to your full satisfaction before signing this document. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you. Separate copies will be kept in a sealed envelope in a locked file cabinet in the New York Theological Seminary Dean's office and by the researcher.

Print Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Name: Byron Moore_____

Researcher's Signature: *Byron Moore*

Date: _____

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Demographics:

Age

Gender

Clergy or Laity

Survey Questions for Dissertation Project

1. *What are your thoughts regarding young adult inclusion in the legislative structure of the AME Church?*
2. *How has the departure of many young adults impacted your faith in the AME Church?*
3. *What is the biggest challenge to attracting and maintaining young adults?*
4. *Has your voice been suppressed on critical issues in your church? If so, how?*
5. *Do you believe your church has maximized your gifts or talents?*
6. *How is your relationship with the older members of your church?*
7. *Do you believe that positions of authority have been withheld from you because of your age?*
8. *What would improving relationships between young adults and seniors take?*
9. *Has the move to greater use of technology increased the dependency upon young adults?*
10. *What ministry issues are important to you that are seemingly not important to those in the older generation?*
11. *Do you feel that you have adequate representation of your generation in critical decisions regarding the direction of your church?*
12. *Does RAYAC being established in 1996 speak more to progress or to antiquated thinking because it took so long to recognize this age group officially?*
13. *Does your age serve as an asset or a liability in your faith experience, explain.*
14. *What do you value in the older generation and what do you wish they valued in your generation?*
15. *What do you see for the future of the AME Church?*
16. *Do you see yourself remaining in the AME Church in the next 20 years?*
17. *How can the church better service your personal spiritual needs?*
18. *Name one thing you love about the AME Church.*
19. *Name one thing you dislike about the AME Church.*
20. *What Is your hope for the future of our denomination and how would you like to contribute to it legislatively?*

21. *How would you empower and grow the influence of RAYAC?*
22. *Do you think that the General Conference should underwrite some of the costs for youth and young adult attendance?*
23. *How can the church support sexuality diversity or how might we positively engage the LGBTQ+ community?*

The chief investigator will also conduct a focus group in New Orleans, LA at the Bishop's Council and General Board meeting of the AME Church in June of 2023.

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